



# **RED COMMUNIST CHINA: 1945-1976**

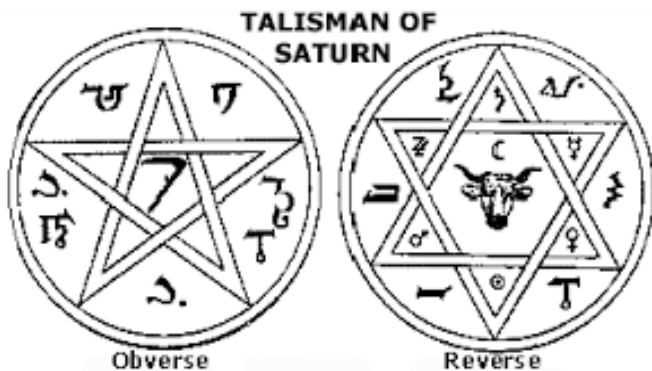
**Revolution**

**Great Leap Forward**

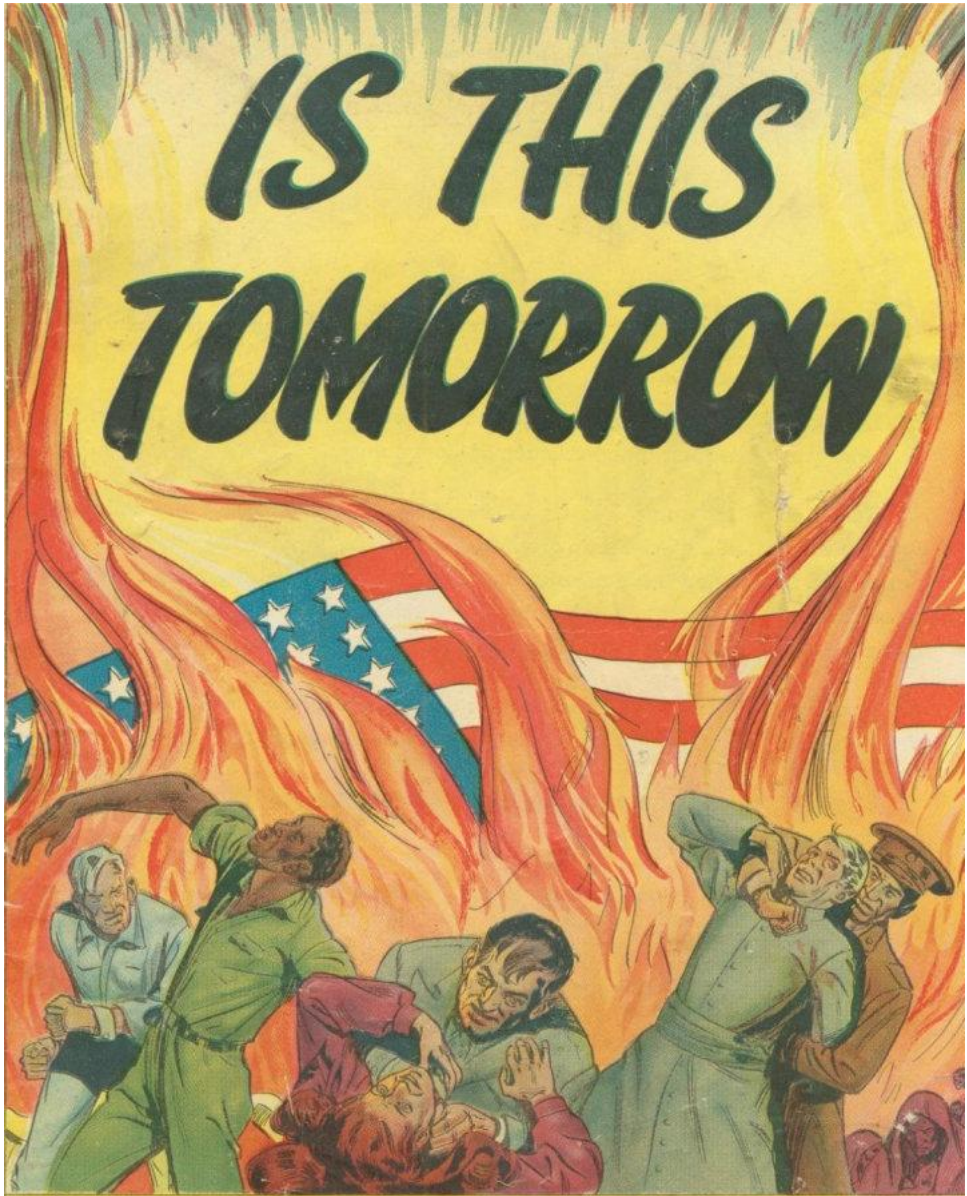
**Cultural Revolution**

‘[W]in over the majority, oppose the minority and crush all enemies separately.’

Mao Zedong



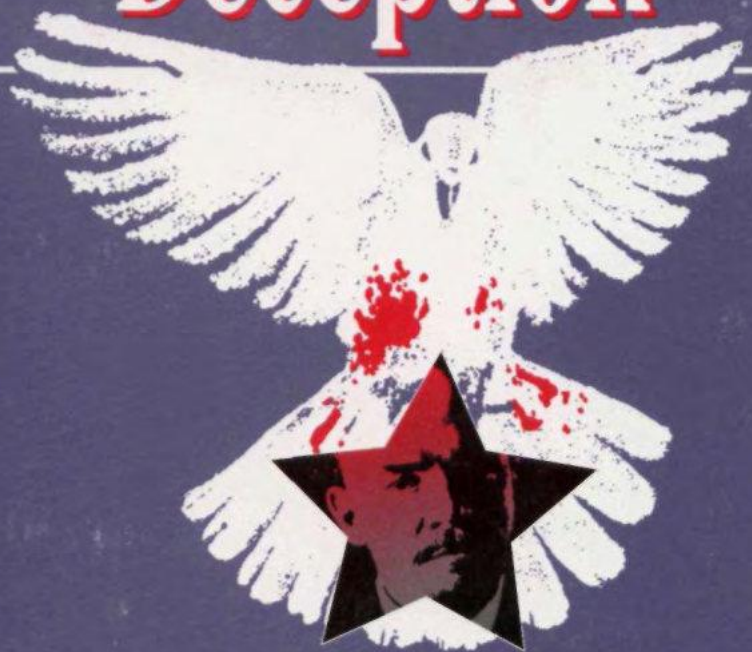
# IS THIS TOMORROW



# AMERICA UNDER COMMUNISM!



# The Perestroika Deception

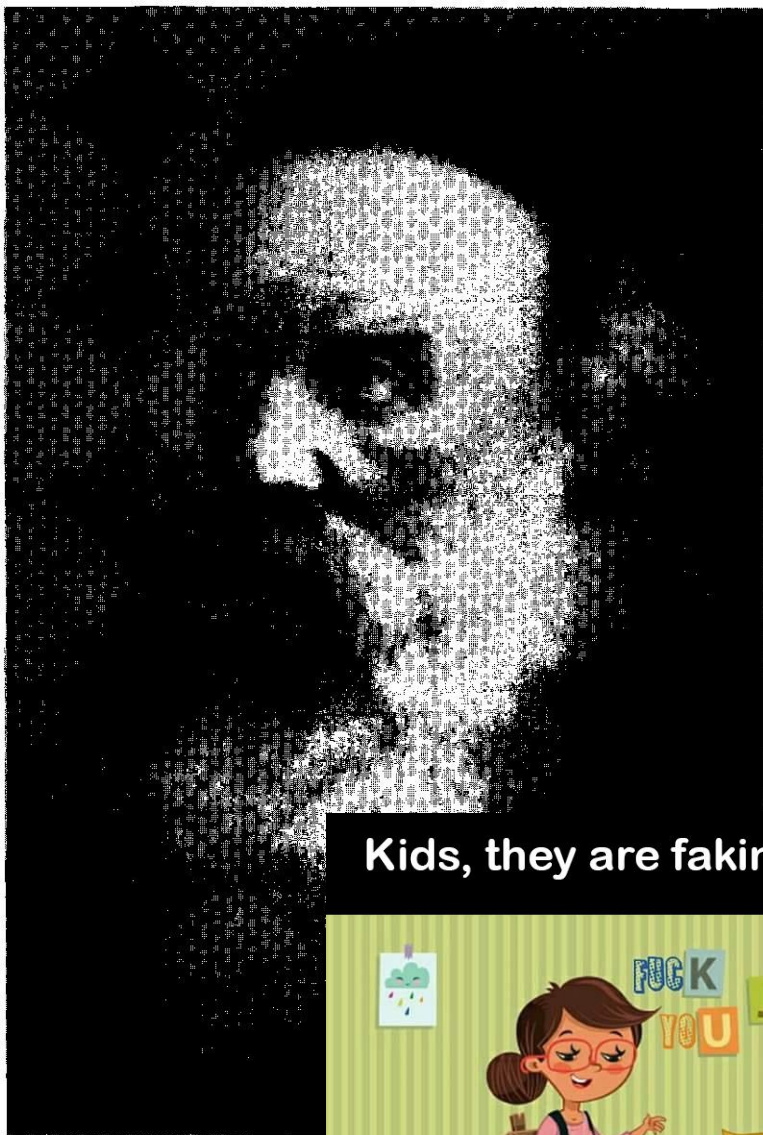


The world's slide towards  
THE 'SECOND OCTOBER REVOLUTION'  
['WELTOKTOBER']

**Anatoliy Golitsyn**

Author of 'New Lies For Old'





**Kids, they are faking events**



**to promote communism.**

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## Preface

The Chinese Communist Party refers to its victory in 1949 as a 'liberation'. The term brings to mind jubilant crowds taking to the streets to celebrate their newly won freedom, but in China the story of liberation and the revolution that followed is not one of peace, liberty and justice. It is first and foremost a history of calculated terror and systematic violence.

The Second World War in China had been a bloody affair, but the civil war from 1945 to 1949 also claimed hundreds of thousands of civilian lives – not counting military casualties. As the communists tried to wrest the country from Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists, they laid siege to one city after another, starving them into submission. Changchun, in the middle of the vast Manchurian plain north of the Great Wall of China, was blockaded for five months in 1948. Lin Biao, the commander in charge of the communist troops, ordered that it be turned into a 'city of death'. He placed sentries every 50 metres along a perimeter around the city and prohibited starving civilians from leaving, putting more pressure on the grain reserves of the nationalists. People tried to survive by eating grass, insects and tree bark. A few turned to human flesh. Anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery bombarded the city day and night. At least 160,000 people died of hunger and disease during the siege.

A few months later, the People's Liberation Army moved into Beijing unopposed. Other cities also fell without firing a shot, unwilling to endure a prolonged blockade. In parts of the country, sympathetic crowds even welcomed the communists, relieved that the war had come to an end and hopeful of a better future. Across the country people accepted liberation with a mixture of fear, hope and resignation.

In the countryside, land reform followed liberation. Farmers were given a plot of land in exchange for overthrowing their leaders. Violence was an indispensable feature of land distribution, implicating a majority in the murder of a carefully designated minority. Work teams were given quotas of people who had to be denounced, humiliated, beaten, dispossessed and then killed by the villagers, who were assembled in their hundreds in an atmosphere charged with hatred. In a pact sealed in blood between the party and the poor, close to 2 million so-called 'landlords', often hardly any better off than their neighbours, were liquidated. From Hebei, Liu Shaoqi, the second-in-command, re-



ported that some of them had been buried alive, tied up and dismembered, shot or throttled to death. Some children were slaughtered as 'little landlords'.

Less than a year after liberation came a Great Terror, designed to eliminate all the enemies of the party. Mao handed down a killing quota of one per thousand, but in many parts of the country two or three times as many people were executed, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. Entire villages were razed to the ground. Schoolchildren as young as six were accused of spying for the enemy and tortured to death. Sometimes cadres simply picked a few prisoners at random and had them shot to meet their quota. By the end of 1951, close to 2 million people had been murdered, sometimes during public rallies in stadiums, but more often than not away from the public eye, in forests, ravines, beside rivers, alone or in batches. A vast network of prisons scattered across the length and breadth of the country swallowed up many more.

Violence *was* the revolution, to paraphrase Simon Schama's observation about the French Revolution. But violence needed to be inflicted only occasionally to be effective. Fear and intimidation were its trusted companions, and they were widely used. People were encouraged to transform themselves into what the communists called 'New People'. Everywhere, in government offices, factories, workshops, schools and universities, they were 're-educated' and made to study newspapers and textbooks, learning the right answers, the right ideas and the right slogans. While the violence abated after a few years, thought reform never ended, as people were compelled to scrutinise their every belief, suppressing the transitory impressions that might reveal hidden bourgeois thoughts behind a mask of socialist conformity. Again and again, in front of assembled crowds or in study sessions under strict supervision, they had to write confessions, denounce their friends, justify their past activities and answer queries about their political reliability. One victim called it a 'carefully cultivated Auschwitz of the mind'.

Yet much of the regime was founded on far more than mere violence and intimidation. The history of communism in China is also a history of promises made and promises broken. The communists wanted to woo before they tried to control. Like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Mao achieved power by promising every disaffected group what they wanted most: land for the farmers, independence for all minorities, freedom for intellectuals, protection of private property for businessmen, higher living standards for the workers. The Chinese Communist Party rallied a majority under the

banner of the New Democracy, a slogan promising co-operation with all except the most hardened enemies of the regime. Under the façade of a ‘united front’, a number of non-communist organisations such as the Democratic Party were co-opted into power, although they remained under the leadership of the communist party.

One by one these promises were broken. Mao was a master of strategy: ‘win over the majority, oppose the minority and crush all enemies separately’. One by one a whole range of opponents were eliminated with the unwitting help of the enemies of tomorrow, those who were cajoled into co-operating with the authorities. Immediately after the bloody terror of 1951, the regime turned against the former government servants it had asked to stay on a few years earlier. Their services no longer needed; over a million of them were sacked from their jobs or thrown in gaol.

The business community was attacked in 1952. Entrepreneurs were dragged to denunciation meetings where they had to confront their employees, who were worked up into a fever pitch of hatred – real or feigned. In a mere two months, more than 600 entrepreneurs, businessmen and shopkeepers killed themselves in Shanghai alone. Many others were ruined. Everything that stood between the entrepreneur and the state was eliminated. All existing laws and judicial organs were abolished, replaced by a legal system inspired by the Soviet Union. Free speech was curtailed. Independent courts were replaced by people’s tribunals. Autonomous chambers of commerce were taken over by local branches of the state-controlled All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. In 1956 the government expropriated all private enterprises – whether small shops or large industries – under the so-called ‘redemption-purchase policy’, although the policy entailed neither purchase nor redemption.

In the countryside, despite fierce resistance to collectivisation and the devastation it produced, in 1956 farmers lost their tools, their land and their livestock. They also lost their freedom of movement and were compelled to sell their grain to the state at prices mandated by the state. They became bonded labourers at the beck and call of local cadres. Already by 1954, by the admission of the regime itself, farmers had a third less food to eat compared to the years before liberation. Almost everybody in the countryside was on a starvation diet.

When Mao turned against intellectuals in 1957, sending half a million of them to the gulag, it was the culmination of a series of drives by the party to eliminate all opposition, whether it came from ethnic minorities, religious groups, farmers, artisans, entrepreneurs, industrialists, teachers and scholars

or doubters within the ranks of the party itself. After a decade of communist rule, there was hardly anybody left to oppose the Chairman.

But even as every promise was broken, the party kept on gaining followers. Many were idealists, some were opportunists, others thugs. They displayed astonishing faith and almost fanatical conviction, sometimes even after they themselves had ended up being devoured by the party machinery. A few party intellectuals purged in 1957 actually volunteered to work in the Great Northern Wilderness, a vast swamp infected with mosquitoes where prisoners were sent to reclaim wasteland. They saw it as an opportunity to redeem themselves and seek self-renewal in the hope of being allowed to serve the party again.

‘Is there *any* good that the Chinese Communists have done?’ Valentin Chu asked in a landmark book entitled *The Inside Story of Communist China*, published a decade after the communist conquest. His answer was that a single act or a single programme, when isolated from the broader picture, may very well have been invaluable: a dam that worked, a nursery where children fared well, a prison where the inmates were treated humanely. The campaign to eliminate illiteracy in the countryside was laudable, until it was given up. But when seen in the overall context of what happened to the country between 1949 and 1957, these isolated achievements did not amount to a broad trend towards equality, justice and freedom, the proclaimed values of the regime itself.

People from all walks of life were caught up in this huge tragedy, and they are at the heart of this book. Their experiences have often been silenced, not least by the official propaganda that produced a seemingly endless flow of pronouncements from the leadership. The propaganda was about the world in the making, not about the reality on the ground. It was a world of plans, blueprints and models, featuring model workers and model peasants, not real people of flesh and blood.

Historians, too, have sometimes confused the abstract world presented by propaganda with the complicated individual tragedies of revolution, buying all too readily into the gleaming image that the regime so carefully projected to the rest of the world. Some have called the years of liberation a ‘Golden Age’ or a ‘Honeymoon Period’, in contrast to the cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966. On a more popular level, keepers of the faith continue to portray the Chinese revolution as one of the greatest events in world history, all the more so as other communist dictators, Russia’s Joseph Stalin, Cambodia’s Pol Pot and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, have lost much of their credibility. But, as this book shows, the first decade



of Maoism was one of the worst tyrannies in the history of the twentieth century, sending to an early grave at least 5 million civilians and bringing misery to countless more.

The bulk of the evidence presented in this book comes from party archives in China. Over the past few years vast amounts of material have become available, and I draw on hundreds of previously classified documents, including secret police reports, unexpurgated versions of important leadership speeches, confessions extracted during thought-reform campaigns, inquiries into rebellions in the countryside, detailed statistics on the victims of the Great Terror, surveys of working conditions in factories and workshops, letters of complaint written by ordinary people, and much more. Other sources include personal memoirs, letters and diaries, as well as eyewitness accounts from people who lived through the revolution. Sympathisers of the regime have unjustly discarded many of the claims of these earlier eyewitnesses, but these can now be corroborated by archival evidence, giving them a new lease of life. Taken as a whole, these sources offer us an unprecedented opportunity to probe beyond the shiny surface of propaganda and retrieve the stories of the ordinary men and women who were both the main protagonists and the main victims of the revolution.

*The Tragedy of Liberation* is the second volume of the *People's Trilogy*. It precedes chronologically an earlier volume, *Mao's Great Famine*, which looks at the man-made catastrophe that claimed tens of millions of lives between 1958 and 1962. A third and final volume on the Cultural Revolution will follow in due course. The nature of the archival evidence that underpins the *People's Trilogy* is explained in greater detail in an essay on the sources in *Mao's Great Famine*.

# Chronology

6 and 9 August 1945:

Atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

8 August 1945:

Stalin declares war on Japan and Soviet troops invade Manchuria.

21 August 1945:

A formal surrender ceremony between China and Japan concludes the Second World War in the Pacific.

April 1946:

Soviet troops withdraw from Manchuria after allowing the communists to take over the countryside.

May 1946:

Mao calls for radical land distribution and all-out class struggle in the countryside.

June 1946:

The nationalists pursue the communists all the way to the northern border of Manchuria, but are forced to halt their advance as George Marshall, President Truman's envoy, imposes a ceasefire. The communist troops regroup and are trained by the Soviets.

September 1946–July 1947:

Truman imposes an arms embargo.

December 1946–December 1947:

The nationalists keep on pouring their best troops into Manchuria, which turns into a death trap.

December 1947–November 1948:

The communists win the battle of Manchuria after blockading all major cities.

22 January 1949:

Beijing surrenders to the communists after a forty-day siege.

November 1948–January 1949:

The nationalists lose the battle of Xuzhou in central China, opening up the Yangzi Valley and all of the south to communist conquest.

April–May 1949:

Nanjing, the nationalist capital on the south bank of the Yangzi, falls to the communists. After a protracted siege, the communists conquer Shanghai.

30 June 1949:

On the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao announces that China should 'lean to one side' and embrace the Soviet Union.

1 October 1949:

Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China on Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

10 December 1949:

After the fall of Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek abandons China and flees to Taiwan.

December 1949–January 1950:

Mao is in Moscow to obtain recognition and help from Stalin. On 14 February 1950 China signs a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union.

June 1950–October 1952:

The communists implement land reform in the south.

25 June 1950:

North Korea invades South Korea, drawing condemnation from the United Nations Security Council and a counter-offensive under General Douglas MacArthur.

7 October 1950:

The People's Liberation Army invades Tibet.

10 October 1950–October 1951:

A Great Terror unfolds, called the 'Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries'.

18 October 1950:

China enters the Korean War.

November 1950:

Start of a campaign to 'Resist America, Aid Korea'.

1951–1953:

Once the land has been redistributed, villagers are pooled into 'mutual-aid teams' in which they have to share their tools, working animals and labour.

October 1951–June 1952:

A 'Three-Anti Campaign' aims to purge the ranks of the government.

October 1951:

Start of a thought-reform campaign designed to regiment and absorb the educated elite into the state bureaucracy.

January–June 1952:



Mao declares war on the private sector in a campaign known as the ‘Five-Anti Campaign’.

February–April 1952:

Beijing alleges that the United States is waging germ warfare.

5 March 1953:

Stalin dies.

27 July 1953:

A ceasefire brings an end to the Korean War.

November 1953:

Introduction of a state monopoly over grain, as cultivators are forced to sell all ‘surplus’ grain to the state at prices determined by the state.

1953–1955:

The mutual-aid teams are turned into co-operatives, with tools, working animals and labour now shared on a permanent basis and the land pooled.

February 1954–May 1955:

Gao Gang and other senior leaders are purged for ‘treachery’ and ‘splitting the party’.

April–December 1955:

Hu Feng and other intellectuals are denounced for heading a ‘counter-revolutionary’ clique. More than 770,000 people are arrested in a campaign against counter-revolutionaries.

June 1955:

A household-registration system restricts the movement of people in the countryside.

Summer 1955–spring 1956:

As part of a push to accelerate the collectivisation of the countryside, called the ‘Socialist High Tide’, farmers are herded into collectives in which they no longer own the land. In the cities most industry and commerce are nationalised.

February 1956:

Khrushchev denounces Stalin and the cult of personality in a secret speech in Moscow. Criticism of Stalin’s disastrous campaign of collectivisation strengthens the position of those opposed to the Socialist High Tide in China. Mao perceives deStalinisation as a challenge to his own authority.

September 1956:

A reference to ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ is removed from the party constitution, the principle of collective leadership is lauded and the cult of personality is decried. The Socialist High Tide is abandoned.

October 1956:

Encouraged by deStalinisation, people in Hungary revolt against their own government, prompting Soviet forces to invade the country, crush all opposition and install a new regime with Moscow's backing.

Winter 1956–spring 1957:

Mao, overriding most of his colleagues, encourages a more open political climate with the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign to avoid the social unrest that led to the invasion of Hungary. Students and workers demonstrate, protest and strike across the country.

Summer 1957:

The campaign backfires as a mounting barrage of criticism questions the very right of the party to rule. Mao changes tack and accuses these critical voices of being 'bad elements' bent on destroying the party. He puts Deng Xiaoping in charge of an anti-rightist campaign, which persecutes half a million people – many of them students and intellectuals deported to remote areas to do hard labour. The party finds unity behind its Chairman, who unleashes the 'Great Leap Forward' a few months later.

## MAP

China, 1957



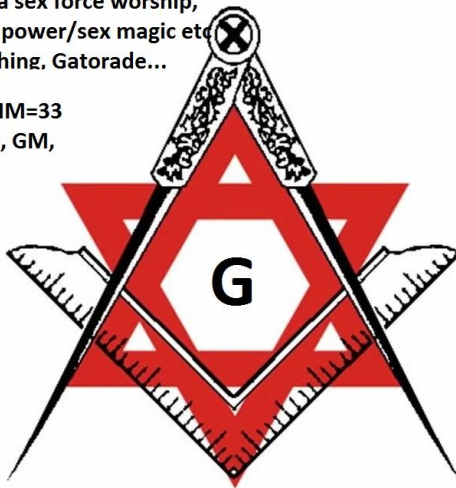
## Part One

# Conquest (1945–49)



G=7, generation aka sex force worship,  
Kunalinga, serpent power/sex magic etc  
"nuthin but a "G" thing. Gatorade...

M=13, Mirrored, MM=33  
on its side, M&M's, GM,  
etc



## Siege

When workers in Changchun started digging trenches for a new irrigation system in the summer of 2006, they made a gruesome discovery. The rich black soil was clogged with human remains. Below a metre of earth were thousands of skeletons closely packed together. When they dug deeper, the workers found several more layers of bones, stacked up like firewood. A crowd of local residents, gathered around the excavated area, was taken aback by the sheer size of the burial site. Some thought that the bodies belonged to victims of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Nobody except an elderly man realised that they had just stumbled on remnants of the civil war that had resumed after 1945 between Mao Zedong's communists and Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists.

In 1948 the communists had laid siege to Changchun for five months, starving out a nationalist garrison stationed inside the city walls. Victory came at a heavy cost. At least 160,000 civilians died of hunger during the blockade. After liberation the communist troops buried many of the bodies in mass graves without so much as a tombstone, a name plate or even a simple marker. After decades of propaganda about the peaceful liberation of China, few people remember the victims of the communist party's rise to power.<sup>1</sup>

Changchun, in the middle of the vast Manchurian plain north of the Great Wall of China, was a minor trading town before the arrival of the railway in 1898. It developed rapidly as the junction between the South Manchurian Railway, run by the Japanese, and the Chinese Eastern Railway, owned by the Russians. In 1932 Changchun became the capital of Manchukuo, a puppet state of imperial Japan, which installed Henry Puyi, later known as the last emperor, as its Manchu ruler. The Japanese transformed the city into a modern, wheel-shaped city with broad avenues, shade trees and public works. Large, cream-coloured buildings for the imperial bureaucracy appeared beside spacious parks, while elegant villas were built for local collaborators and their Japanese advisers.

In August 1945, the Soviet army took over the city and, so far as they could, dismantled the factories, machines and materials, sending the war booty back by the trainload to the Soviet Union. Industrial installations were demolished, and many of the formerly handsome houses were stripped bare. The Soviets stayed until April 1946, when the nationalist army took over the city. Two months later, the civil war began, and Manchuria once again became a battlefield. The communist armies had the initiative and moved down from the north, cutting the railway that connected Changchun with nationalist strongholds further south.

In April 1948, the communists advanced towards Changchun itself. Led by Lin Biao, a gaunt man who had trained at the Whampoa Military Academy, they laid siege to the city. Lin was considered one of the best battlefield commanders and a brilliant strategist. He was also ruthless. When he realised that Zheng Dongguo, the defending commander in Changchun, would not capitulate, he ordered the city to be starved into surrender. On 30 May 1948 came his command: 'Turn Changchun into a city of death.'<sup>2</sup>

Inside Changchun were some 500,000 civilians, many of them refugees who had fled the communist advance and were trapped in their journey south to Beijing after the railway lines had been cut. A hundred thousand nationalist troops were also garrisoned inside the city. Curfew was imposed almost immediately, keeping people indoors from eight at night to five in the morning. All able-bodied men were made to dig trenches. Nobody was allowed to leave. People who refused to be searched by sentries were liable to be shot on the spot. Yet an air of goodwill still prevailed in the first weeks of the siege, as emergency supplies were dropped by air. Some of the well-to-do even established a Changchun Mobilisation Committee, supplying sweets and cigarettes, comforting the wounded and setting up tea stalls for the men.<sup>3</sup>

But soon the situation deteriorated. Changchun became an isolated island, beleaguered by 200,000 communist troops who dug tunnel defences and cut off the underground water supply to the city. Two dozen anti-aircraft guns and heavy artillery bombarded the city all day long, concentrating their fire on government buildings. The nationalists built three defensive lines of pillboxes around Changchun. Between the nationalists and the communists lay a vast no man's land soon taken over by bandits.<sup>4</sup>

On 12 June 1948 Chiang Kai-shek cabled an order reversing the ban on people leaving the city. Even without enemy fire, his planes could not possibly parachute in enough supplies to meet the needs of an entire city. But the anti-aircraft artillery of the communists forced them to fly at an altitude

of 3,000 metres. Many of the airdrops landed outside the area controlled by the nationalists. In order to prevent a famine, the nationalists encouraged the populace to head for the countryside. Once they had left they were not allowed back, as they could not be fed. Every departing refugee was subject to rigorous inspection. Metallic objects such as pots or pans as well as gold and silver and even salt, seen as a vital commodity, were prohibited. Then the refugees had to cross the no man's land, a dark and dangerous terrain dominated by gangs, usually army deserters, who preyed on the defenceless crowds. Many had guns and even horses; some used passwords. The most skilful refugees managed to conceal a piece of jewellery, a watch or a fountain pen, but those found to be hiding an earring or a bracelet in a seam of their clothing risked being shot. Sometimes all their clothes were snatched. A few saved their best belongings by bundling them deep inside a burlap bag filled with dirty rags, including urine-soaked baby clothes, in the hope that the smell would repel robbers.<sup>5</sup>

Few ever made it past the communist lines. Lin Biao had placed a sentry every 50 metres along barbed wire and trenches 4 metres deep. Every exit was blocked. He reported to Mao: 'We don't allow the refugees to leave and exhort them to turn back. This method was very effective in the beginning, but later the famine got worse, and starving civilians would leave the city in droves at all times of day and night, and after we turned them down they started gathering in the area between our troops and the enemy.' Lin described how desperate the refugees were to be allowed through communist lines, explaining that they:

knelt in front of our troops in large groups and begged us to let them through. Some left their babies and small children with us and absconded, others hanged themselves in front of sentry posts. The soldiers who saw this misery lost their resolve, some even falling on their knees to weep with the starving people, saying, 'We are only following orders.' Others covertly allowed some of them through. After we corrected this, another tendency was discovered, namely the beating, tying up and shooting of refugees by soldiers, some to death (we do not as yet have any numbers for those injured or beaten to death).

Half a century later, Wang Junru explained what had happened when he was a soldier: 'We were told they were the enemy and they had to die.' Wang was fifteen when the communists forced him to enrol in the army. During the siege he joined the other soldiers ordered to drive back hungry civilians.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of June, some 30,000 people were caught in the area between the communists, who would not allow them to pass, and the nationalists, who refused to let them back into the city. Hundreds died every day. Two months later, more than 150,000 civilians were pressed inside the death



zone, reduced to eating grass and leaves, doomed to slow starvation. Dead bodies were strewn everywhere, their bellies bloated in the scorching sun. 'The pungent stench of decomposition was everywhere,' remembered one survivor.<sup>7</sup>

The situation inside the city was little better. Besides the airdrops for the garrison, some 330 tonnes of grain were required daily to feed the civilians, although at best 84 tonnes were delivered by four or five planes, and often much less. Everything was requisitioned in the defence of Changchun. Chiang Kai-shek even prohibited private trading in August, threatening to shoot any merchant who contravened his order. Soon the nationalist soldiers turned on the civilians, stealing their food at gunpoint. They slaughtered all the army horses, then dogs, cats and birds. Ordinary people ate rotten sorghum and corncobs before stripping the bark from trees. Others ate insects or leather belts. A few turned to human flesh, sold at \$1.20 a pound on the black market.<sup>8</sup>

Cases of collective suicide occurred all the time. Entire families killed themselves to escape from the misery. Dozens died by the roadside every day. 'We were just lying in bed starving to death,' said Zhang Yinghua when interviewed about the famine that claimed the lives of her brother, her sister and most of her neighbours. 'We couldn't even crawl.' Song Zhanlin, another survivor, remembered how she passed a small house with the door ajar. 'I entered to have a look and saw a dozen bodies lying all over the place, on the bed and on the floor. Among those on the bed, one was resting his head on a pillow, and a girl was still embracing a baby: it looked as if they were asleep. The clock on the wall was still ticking away.'<sup>9</sup>

Autumn saw temperatures plunge, and the survivors struggled to stay warm. They stripped floorboards, rooftops, sometimes entire buildings in the search for fuel. Trees were chopped down, even signboards were pilfered for wood. Asphalt was ripped from the streets. Like a slow-moving implosion, the gradual destruction of the city started in the suburbs and gradually rippled towards the centre. In the end 40 per cent of the housing went up in smoke. Heavy bombardment by artillery at point-blank range added to the misery, as ordinary people sheltered in shanties strewn with debris and decomposing bodies, while the nationalist top brass took refuge behind the massive concrete walls of the Central Bank of China.<sup>10</sup>

Soldiers absconded throughout the siege. Unlike the civilians who were driven back, they were welcomed by the communists and promised good food and lenient treatment. Day and night loudspeakers beamed propaganda encouraging them to defect or rebel: 'Did you join the Guomindang army?

You were dragged into it at a rope's end . . . Come over to us . . . There is no way out of Changchun now . . .’ Desertion rates soared after the summer, as the troops received a reduced ration of 300 grams of rice and flour a day.<sup>11</sup>

The siege lasted 150 days. In the end, on 16 October 1948, Chiang ordered General Zheng Dongguo to evacuate the city and cut southwards to Shenyang, the first large city along the railway leading towards Beijing. ‘If Changchun falls, do you really think Peiping [the name for Beijing before 1949] will be safe?’ Zheng was asked. He gave a sigh: ‘No place in China will be safe.’<sup>12</sup>

Zheng had two armies to withdraw: the Sixtieth, composed mostly of dispirited soldiers from the subtropical province of Yunnan, and the New Seventh Army, made up of tough US-trained veterans who had fought on the Burma front. The Seventh stormed out as ordered, but failed to break through the blockade. The Sixtieth refused to leave, and in any event the soldiers were too weak to march all the way to Shenyang. They turned their guns against the Seventh and handed the city over to Lin Biao.

Hailed in China’s history books as a decisive victory in the battle of Manchuria, the fall of Changchun came at huge cost, as an estimated 160,000 civilians were starved to death inside the area besieged by the communists. ‘Changchun was like Hiroshima,’ wrote Zhang Zhenglong, a lieutenant in the People’s Liberation Army who documented the siege. ‘The casualties were about the same. Hiroshima took nine seconds; Changchun took five months.’<sup>13</sup>



## War

On 6 August 1945 a B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Three days later Nagasaki was erased in a blinding flash of light. Within a week Emperor Hirohito had ordered his armies to lay down their weapons.

The unconditional surrender of Japan was met with jubilation across China, ending one of the bloodiest chapters in the history of the country. In Chongqing, the wartime capital of Chiang Kai-shek, shouts and firecrackers erupted all over the city, ‘sporadic at first but growing to a volcanic eruption of sound and happiness within an hour’. Searchlights festively danced across the sky. A flood of cheering, laughing and crying people poured through the streets, overwhelming every US soldier they could find with gifts of cigarettes. After Chiang had read his message of victory over the radio, dressed in a simple khaki uniform without any decorations, he walked out of the broadcasting studio and was engulfed by a joyous crowd. Well-wishers crawled through police lines, others hung from balconies, yelled from rooftops or held their children high above the crowd to see the Generalissimo.<sup>1</sup>

The eight-year war had plumbed the depths of human depravity. After Japanese troops took the capital Nanjing in December 1937, civilians and disarmed soldiers were systematically slaughtered in a six-week orgy of violence. Captives were rounded up and machine-gunned, blown up with landmines or stabbed to death with bayonets. Women, including infants and the elderly, were raped, mutilated and killed by soldiers on the rampage. No accurate death toll has ever been produced, but estimates range from a minimum of 40,000 to an upper limit of 300,000 deaths. During the last years of the war, in retaliation against guerrilla resistance, a pitiless policy of scorched earth devastated parts of north China, as whole villages were burned to the ground. Men between the ages of fifteen and sixty suspected of being enemy were rounded up and killed.

Throughout their occupation, the Japanese had used biological and chemical weapons. Lethal experiments were conducted on prisoners of war in a string of secret laboratories stretching from northern Manchuria to subtropical Guangdong. Victims were subjected to vivisection without anaesthesia after being infected with various germs. Others had their limbs amputated, their stomachs

excised or parts of their organs surgically removed. Weapons, including flamethrowers and chemical agents, were tested on prisoners tied to stakes. In Unit 731, a notorious compound near Harbin that came complete with an aerodrome, a railway station, barracks, laboratories, operating rooms, crematoria, a cinema and even a Shinto temple, contaminated fleas and infected clothing were developed to spread plague, anthrax and cholera when dropped on civilians in encased bombs.<sup>2</sup> To escape the Japanese and their collaborators, tens of millions of refugees fled southwards towards Yunnan and Sichuan, where the nationalists had their wartime bases. But even in unoccupied territory people lived in fear, as massive air raids were mounted on civilian targets in the capital Chongqing and other major cities, leaving millions dead, injured and homeless.<sup>3</sup>

With the prospect of peace, the tide of humanity that had flowed from the coast to the interior started to turn. A rickshaw puller spelled out the meaning of Japan's capitulation after reading one of Chongqing's wall newspapers, mumbling, 'Japan is defeated. Can we go home now?' Across China's vast hinterland, millions of involuntary exiles began selling their make-shift furniture, preparing to trek back home and pick up the threads of their former lives, rebuilding families, homes and businesses. Along the banks of the Yangzi River, people searched for boats to float downstream; others pushed carts and trudged on foot in the scorching heat.<sup>4</sup>

The government, too, prepared to return home. The formal surrender ceremony between China and Japan took place on 21 August 1945 at the Zhijiang Airfield in Hunan. In the shade of a cherry tree, Major General Takeo Imai handed over a map showing the positions of his 1,000,000 troops in China. They were allowed to retain their arms and maintain public order until the arrival of nationalist troops, rushed to all the key cities south of the Great Wall in a spectacular sea-transport and airlift operation executed under the command of General Albert Wedemeyer, one of the most senior US military officers in East Asia. In the largest aerial troop movement of the Second World War, some 80,000 soldiers of the Sixth Army were flown to Nanjing to retake their erstwhile capital. In Shanghai, the shabbily clothed soldiers of the Ninety-Fourth Army who stepped out of giant transport aircrafts blinked at the sight of a large crowd waving banners on the runway. 'The peasant soldiers came timidly down the steep ladders, trying to salute, dazed by this overwhelming glimpse of the people they had come to liberate. The liberated wore silken gowns and leather shoes; the liberators' feet were dusty in straw sandals.'<sup>5</sup>

On the streets of Shanghai cheering crowds put up huge portraits of Chiang Kai-shek, decorated with garland flowers and crêpe paper. All along the coast, when troops of the national government entered the cities, ‘multitudes of people lined the streets and shouted themselves hoarse to welcome their liberators’. A third army was flown to Beijing, as US air forces landed between 2,000 and 4,000 nationalist regulars daily in a race against the clock. By early November, the last Japanese south of the Great Wall were being rounded up and disarmed.<sup>6</sup>

But Chiang Kai-shek was not the only one making a claim on the territory of China. Two days after Hiroshima had been bombed, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan, keeping to a promise Joseph Stalin had made to Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt at Yalta in February 1945. At the Soviet holiday resort on the Black Sea, Stalin had demanded control of the Manchurian seaports of Dalian and Port Arthur as well as joint control with China over Manchuria’s railways in exchange for breaking his non-aggression pact with Japan. Roosevelt made these concessions without consulting his wartime ally Chiang Kai-shek. Stalin also requested two months’ supply of food and fuel for an army of 1.5 million men. This, too, Roosevelt accepted, as hundreds of shiploads of lend-lease material were sent to Siberia, including 500 Sherman tanks.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, even as they raced to reach Berlin and occupy half of Europe before the Americans, the Soviets still managed to keep almost a million troops in Siberia. On 8 August 1945 they poured across the Amur River into Manchuria with tactical aircraft in support. Armoured trains carrying elite troops moved east along the Chinese Eastern Railway towards Harbin, making gains of up to 70 kilometres a day. A separate drive from Vladivostok was launched southwards into Korea, where the port of Rashin was soon captured. The Japanese had few aircraft and offered little effective opposition. Within days the Russians had won control of all strategic points in Manchuria.<sup>8</sup>

Not far away, a mere hundred kilometres south of the Great Wall, Mao Zedong was counting his troops. After several years of collaboration, a civil war had erupted between the communists and the nationalists in 1927, and in 1934 Mao Zedong and his supporters had been forced to retreat deep inland to evade Chiang Kai-shek’s forces. A year later, some 20,000 survivors of the Long March had set up headquarters in land-locked Yan’an, far behind enemy lines, many of the troops living in cave dwellings. After a dec-

ade of consolidating his authority, Mao controlled some 900,000 guerrilla fighters in rural pockets across the north of China. He was ready to strike.

But Mao could be overly optimistic in his assessment of the balance of power. He had grandiose plans to incite a rebellion in Shanghai and take over the country's financial powerhouse. Impulsively, he ordered 3,000 undercover troops to enter the city and prepare for a general uprising, which, he hoped, would precipitate a revolution. When reports indicated that his forces were hopelessly outnumbered, with little popular support, he persisted with his strategy. Stalin intervened, telling him to restrain his troops and avoid open confrontations with the nationalists. Mao reluctantly agreed. As the Red Army occupied Manchuria, Mao came up with a new vision: his aim was now to link up with the Russians and claim a belt of territory reaching from Outer Mongolia across all of Manchuria. Four armed groups moved north, including 100,000 troops of the Eighth Route Army under the command of Lin Biao. They soon met up with the Red Army.<sup>9</sup>

But Stalin's immediate concern was to ensure the departure of the American military from China and Korea. The United States, after all, had a monopoly on the atom bomb and Stalin was wary of another world war. In order to achieve this goal, he openly proclaimed his support of the Chinese National Government and in the Sino-Soviet Treaty recognised Chiang Kai-shek as the leader of a united China. On 20 August 1945, Stalin also sent a message to Mao asking that his troops avoid any open confrontation with the nationalists and consolidate their position in the countryside instead. Mao was obliged to reverse course.<sup>10</sup>

In a weak and divided China, a fearsome prospect unfolded: the Soviet Union could prop up the Chinese Communist Party, leading to the division of the country into a Russian-dominated north and an American-protected south. Negotiations between Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek resumed the day the Red Army invaded Manchuria. In Moscow, T. V. Soong, one of Chiang's most eminent statesmen, had few bargaining chips to put on the negotiating table. In his dealings with Stalin, he had to agree to the concessions Roosevelt had made at Yalta: Port Arthur, a natural harbour on the south tip of Manchuria, would become a Russian naval base, while the Soviets would use the modern port of Dalian on equal terms with China. The Soviet Union and China would co-own the South Manchurian Railway and the Chinese Eastern Railway, both built by imperial Russia. In exchange Stalin recognised the sovereignty of the Chinese National Government over all of China and pledged to turn Manchuria over to Chiang Kai-shek.

With the Sino-Soviet Treaty in his pocket and assured of Moscow's backing for his government, Chiang invited Mao to join peace negotiations and discuss the country's future. At considerable personal risk, Mao flew to Chongqing in the company of Patrick Hurley, the American ambassador. Chiang and Mao had not seen each other for twenty years, and put on contrived smiles at a formal reception held on the first night, toasting each other with millet wine. Mao stayed a full six weeks, wrangling for concessions even as pitched battles between the communists and the nationalists continued on the ground. Eventually, on 18 September, Mao proclaimed: 'We must stop [the] civil war and all parties must unite under the leadership of Chairman Chiang to build a modern China.' A formal statement was made on 10 October, the anniversary of the 1911 revolution that had led to the overthrow of the Qing empire. Back in Yan'an a few days later, Mao explained to his comrades-in-arms that the agreed statement in Chongqing was 'a mere scrap of paper'.<sup>11</sup>

Stalin had publicly given his support to Chiang, but he also wanted to strengthen the Chinese Communist Party as a check on the Chinese National Government – and its American backers. In August he allowed the communists to take over Kalgan. In the nineteenth century, caravans of camels regularly assembled from all over the empire in this key gateway through the Great Wall to carry tea chests to Russia. Kalgan was still called 'Beijing's Northern Door': whoever controlled the old city was in a strategic position to attack Beijing. The Japanese had turned it into an economic and industrial centre, and also left behind an enormous cache of ammunition and weapons, including sixty tanks.<sup>12</sup>

In other cities in Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, Soviet troops were instructed to equip communist units with Japanese arms and vehicles. The exact amount of logistical and military assistance the Soviets gave to the communists is difficult to estimate, but Moscow later claimed that 700,000 rifles, 18,000 machine guns, 860 aircraft and 4,000 artillery pieces were handed over. Behind the scenes, the Soviets recommended that the communists deploy most of their troops in Manchuria. Mao, still in Chongqing, ordered the main force of his guerrilla units to pour across the Great Wall into Manchuria in September. There, with Soviet acquiescence, the communists took in demobilised soldiers, puppet troops and bandit fighters. By the end of the year, Mao had managed to assemble a motley army of 500,000 troops.<sup>13</sup>

Chiang knew full well that the Soviets were co-operating with the communists in Manchuria, but he was in no position to quarrel with Stalin.



He also understood the strategic and economic significance of Manchuria, with its steel mills, huge reserves of iron ore and coal, dense forests and rich farmland. He put General Du Yuming in charge of reclaiming the region. His troops were denied permission to land in Port Arthur and Dalian, now under Soviet control following the Sino-Soviet Treaty. When in October 1945 ships from the US Seventh Fleet sailed instead to Yingkou, a minor harbour with rail connections to the interior, they found a communist garrison. Disembarking further south at Qinhuangdao, General Du breached the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan and lunged forward along the railway, meeting little opposition from communist troops. He covered the 300 kilometres from the Great Wall to the industrial base of Shenyang in less than three weeks. Chiang pleaded with Moscow in the hope of being allowed at least to partition Manchuria. Under pressure to fulfil their commitments to the nationalist government, the Soviets relented and allowed nationalist troops to be airlifted into Changchun, further north along the railway from Shenyang.<sup>14</sup>

The reason for Soviet reluctance soon became apparent: cities had been subjected to a wave of looting by the Red Army. James McHugh, one of the first businessmen allowed into Shenyang, reported that the troops had been let loose ‘for three days of rape and pillage’. They ‘stole everything in sight, broke up bathtubs and toilets with hammers, pulled electric light wiring out of the plaster, built fires on the floor and either burned down the house or at least a big hole in the floor’. Women cut their hair and dressed like men in order to avoid rape. In Shenyang, ‘factories lay like raddled skeletons, picked clean of their machinery’. The city, one reporter wrote, ‘has been reduced from a great industrial city into a tragic, crowded way station on the Russian-controlled railway to Dairen [Dalian]’. The systematic plundering of Manchuria’s industrial infrastructure would later be valued at US\$2 billion.<sup>15</sup>

The Soviets delayed the withdrawal of their troops from Manchuria for five months, and the last of their tanks only rumbled across the border in April 1946. They handed the countryside over to the communists, and allowed Lin Biao to deploy his forces on the outskirts of all major cities. His Eighth Route Army, equipped with Japanese weapons, attacked the nationalist garrison in Changchun and killed most of its 7,000 soldiers. Harbin, Manchuria’s ice city bordering Russia, was turned over to Mao on 28 April.

President Truman, instead of assisting his wartime ally Chiang Kai-shek, sent George Marshall to broker a coalition government between the nationalists and the communists. Chiang was dependent on continuing Americ-

an economic and military assistance and had little choice but to acquiesce, even though the prospect of any lasting agreement between both camps seemed more remote than ever. The communists, on the other hand, had nothing to lose: they used the truce to regroup and expand ever further in Manchuria, entrenching themselves in the countryside away from major cities and the railways. The suave and unassuming Zhou Enlai, Mao's envoy to the peace talks, was a master of deception, cultivating a close relationship with Marshall to present the communists as agrarian reformers keen to learn from democracy. Zhou even persuaded Mao solemnly to declare that 'Chinese democracy must follow the American path.' Mao would agree to almost anything on paper, as long as nobody was checking what he was doing on the ground. When the Red Army pulled out of Manchuria, Marshall came to believe that Stalin had given up on China. His willingness to help Chiang started to waver.<sup>16</sup>

Chiang realised that American support was slipping, but was determined to dislodge the communists from Changchun. His troops met little opposition. In early June 1946, Lin Biao and his army of 100,000 men beat a chaotic retreat towards the north. Chiang's New First and New Sixth Armies went in pursuit, harrying the communists across the Sungari River. Chiang's troops were now within striking distance of Harbin, the only city still in communist hands. Lin Biao's troops were in a state of collapse, as soldiers deserted in large numbers. When interviewed, Zhao Xuzhen, who was a soldier at the time, remembered that even military officers, party members and political instructors absconded in a chaotic retreat: 'some went home, some became bandits, and some surrendered.' But once again Marshall advised Chiang to halt the nationalist advance and proclaim a ceasefire. The American envoy had just visited Yan'an, where Mao had skilfully projected an image of liberal reform and democracy. Marshall even wrote to Truman that the communist forces in Manchuria were 'little more than loosely organised bands'.<sup>17</sup>

The communists used the peace talks to recondition their troops, integrate the 200,000-strong army that had served under the Japanese and recruit more soldiers from the countryside. Other recruits were prisoners of war, criminal elements, Korean units and Manchurian exiles returning from the Soviet Union. All were subjected to harsh training and ruthless discipline, often with the help of hundreds of Soviet technical advisers and military experts. The Russians even opened sixteen military institutions, including air force, artillery and engineering schools. Some Chinese officers went to the Soviet Union for advanced training, others were given refuge in the Rus-

sian enclaves of Port Arthur and Dalian. While the Soviets stripped much of Manchuria's wealth, they left the military arsenals of Dalian untouched. With the help of Japanese technicians and local workers, these were put to work, churning out bullets and shells by the million. Logistical support also continued to arrive across the borders, by rail and by air. In North Korea alone, a full 2,000 wagons were allocated to the task. In return, the Chinese communists sent shipments of more than a million tons of grain as well as other products across the border from Manchuria to Russia in 1947.<sup>18</sup>

While the Russians were helping the communists transform their ragtag army of guerrilla fighters into a formidable war machine, the Americans became so disillusioned with the nationalists that they started cutting off deliveries of armaments. As trainloads of equipment moved back and forth across the border between Manchuria and the Soviet Union, the United States began refusing to license military equipment for China, including sales for which the government had already paid. Then, in September 1946, Truman imposed an arms embargo. It lasted until July 1947 – when the nationalists were allowed to purchase a three-week supply of infantry ammunition.<sup>19</sup>

For a while the nationalists battled on, trying to hold on to the cities along the railway that cut through the extensive Manchurian plain, enclosed by heavily forested mountain ranges. In the ebb and flow of warfare, the nationalists lost several cities only to recapture them in bloody battles with retreating communist troops. These were no longer skirmishes in a guerrilla war: hundreds of thousands of troops clashed in giant confrontations that involved artillery and air support, often in temperatures that fell to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Manchuria, by 1947, was turning into a death trap. Chiang kept on pouring his best troops into Manchuria, but Mao never let up, determined to wear down his enemy in a pitiless war of attrition. In Manchuria alone the communists recruited or conscripted approximately 1 million men. In battle after battle, Chiang's best government troops were destroyed. The nationalists also suffered from poor morale, their troops ensconced in cities for months on end, badly paid and without adequate provisions. Supply lines were extended to breaking point, running through the Great Wall along the Beijing–Changchun railway, which was often sabotaged by communist demolition squads. Military equipment was worn out, and in some cases soldiers were so short of ammunition that they could not fire a single practice shot. Lorries were for the most part broken down, but could not be repaired as the sale of spare parts was prohibited under the arms embargo.<sup>20</sup>

As Zhang Junmai, a veteran diplomat, campaigner for parliamentary democracy and unsparing critic of the nationalist government, later noted, even if an efficient government had existed it would have been no match for the combined forces of Moscow and Yan'an. But Chiang's government barely functioned. The nationalists faced a mammoth task in taking over a country the size of a continent, and one that had been laid waste by eight years of warfare. Even south of the Great Wall, they endured constant harassment from guerrilla troops: the communists plundered towns, looted villages and left behind millions of homeless people. They controlled large parts of the countryside in Hebei and Shandong, cutting off fuel, energy and food supplies to the cities and feeding inflation. Transport, the key to recovery, had been gravely impaired by the Japanese and was now shattered by the communists, who blew up railways and dynamited bridges. In pitiless partisan warfare, everything that tore society apart operated to the communists' advantage.<sup>21</sup>

Most of all, the nationalists were caught in a vicious cycle that predated their clash with the communists. Ever since Japan had invaded China in 1937, they had been unable to finance the war by selling bonds. Taxation covered only a small portion of the cost of the war. The only way forward was to issue paper currency. This meant that the brunt of the war effort fell on the middle class, undermining the standard of living of people on fixed incomes such as schoolteachers, college professors, government employees and, of course, nationalist soldiers and officers. 'In 1940, 100 yuan bought a pig; in 1943, a chicken; in 1945, a fish; in 1946, an egg; and in 1947, one-third of a box of matches.' By 1947 the cost of living was approximately 30,000 times what it had been in 1936, a year before Japan attacked China. Chiang tried to tame inflation in 1947 by banning the export of foreign currency and gold bullion, imposing a ceiling on interest rates and freezing all wages, but these measures had no lasting effect. By 1949 people could be seen wheeling their money in carts.<sup>22</sup>

For army officers or tax collectors alike, the salaries of government employees were held down to extraordinarily low levels. Soldiers were grossly underpaid, and even officers could not support their wives and children on their regular income. Graft, embezzlement and corruption therefore became rampant in many forms. Tax collectors accepted bribes. The police extorted money by threatening the poor with arrest and imprisonment. In the army, officers withheld salaries, inflated the bills or sold military equipment on

the black market. There was no easy solution to the problem. Raising government salaries would have increased inflation, which in turn would have affected the cost of living, leading quickly to the absorption of salary rises and the reappearance of corruption.

The nationalists needed help. They required financial assistance to curb inflation, rebuild the country and buy arms and munitions. Beginning in April 1948, the Marshall Plan, designed by the very man who had tried against all odds to engineer a coalition between Chiang Kai-shek and the communists, provided US\$13 billion in economic and technical assistance to help the recovery of Europe. This sum did not include the \$12 billion in aid that Europe had received between the end of the war and the start of the Plan. Even after Truman had been obliged to abandon the arms embargo on China, which was no longer consistent with the Truman Doctrine – proclaimed by the president in March 1947 and committing the United States to supporting Greece and Turkey with economic and military aid to prevent their falling under Soviet influence – support for the nationalists was minimal. The United States failed to deliver a paltry \$125 million of military help in time even after a Republican majority finally pushed Congress to provide an aid package, which was only passed in April 1948, bringing the total military aid received by China after Victory over Japan Day to something between \$225 and \$360 million.<sup>23</sup>

The tide turned in 1948. For months on end the communists had launched one assault after another in Manchuria, continually hammering the nationalist-held cities. Chiang, determined to hold on at all costs, kept on pouring more troops into the region to make up for the dead and wounded. The loss of Manchuria, he confided in his private journal, would open all of north China to the communists. He was staking everything he had on one huge gamble rather than retreating and holding the line along the Great Wall.<sup>24</sup>

In December 1947, in more than a metre of snow and a temperature of minus 35 degrees Celsius, Lin Biao launched a massive assault across the frozen Sungari River. The People's Liberation Army, as the communist troops now called themselves, had no air cover, but a thick, icy mist and glacial weather severely limited the nationalists' use of aeroplanes. Pressing their military advantage, most of the 400,000 troops swarmed south and laid siege to the cities along the railway, destroying several government divisions.<sup>25</sup>

Shenyang, just south of Changchun, was Manchuria's stronghold, and one of the country's best arsenals. Lin Biao cut the railway between Beijing and Shenyang and laid siege to the city. Inside this island of dwindling resistance, a civilian population of 1.2 million, swollen to 4 million by people fleeing the communists, was blockaded for ten months. Also trapped were 200,000 nationalist soldiers. Drove of people soon abandoned beleaguered Shenyang. Planes of General Claire Chennault's commercial airline shuttled in and out, evacuating about 1,500 passengers to safety each day, but few could afford to bribe their way on board. Fights broke out at the airfield, as the crack of artillery could be heard in the distance. At night people huddled together in a bomb-blasted hangar. The majority, over 100,000 a month, left by train, rattling west towards the edge of the city's defence perimeter where the line came to an end.<sup>26</sup>

People who were too poor or too sick to leave were soon starving. As early as February, Shenyang was short of food, fuel and ammunition. Vitamin deficiencies caused thousands to go blind, while countless others, many of them children, were wasted by noma, a gangrenous disease that destroyed the face, by pellagra, by scurvy and by other diseases of malnutrition. As a foreign reporter noted: 'I walked down the desolate streets past the emaciated bodies of the dead in the gutters, pursued by unbearably pitiful child beggars and women crying out for help.' Shops along empty streets were boarded up, the red-brick factories standing derelict, many of them bombed during the war and then looted by Soviet troops in 1946. People survived by eating bark and leaves and by pressing soybean cakes, normally used as fertiliser or as cattle fodder. Others picked through the debris on the streets.<sup>27</sup>

A flood of misery poured out of Manchuria – refugees escaping from beleaguered cities, farmers fleeing a bloodied countryside, most of them stumbling forward on foot, a few hobbling on crutches or sticks. In the summer of 1948, some 140,000 pressed their way through the military lines around Shenyang and joined the exodus every month. Then they had to trek across a stretch of wilderness infested with armed gangs who capitalised on the chaos of civil war. But an even greater danger loomed 30 kilometres north of Jinzhou, where the railway crossed the Daling River. The nationalists stood guard on the opposite shore, and fired on anybody who tried to wade, swim or take a boat towards them. The only way across the river was through the twisted girders of the blasted railway bridge. For a fee, local guides would strap the refugees on their backs with rope and pick a passage over the broken bridge, their human burden looking down in terror at the

swirling waters far below. From Jinzhou they were packed on refugee trains to Shanhaiguan, where the Great Wall dipped into the Bohai Sea. Here they found a makeshift refugee centre serviced by a single tap with running water. Many people quickly moved on to Beijing and Tianjin, even though few could be housed or adequately fed.<sup>28</sup>

The coup de grâce came in September 1948. Lin Biao staged a frontal attack on Shenyang and deployed close to 300,000 men to encircle Jinzhou, the lifeline to Manchuria. Military engineers blew holes in the city walls. After sustaining 34,000 casualties, Jinzhou fell on 15 October, its remaining 88,000 prisoners being marched off by the People's Liberation Army. A rescue force of 90,000 men, hacking its way through enemy lines outside Shenyang, walked straight into a trap: they were outnumbered and crushed a week later by Lin Biao. In Changchun, the remaining 80,000 troops handed over the city to the communists. Fighting continued in Shenyang for a week, often in bloody hand-to-hand combat inside the city after the walls had been demolished by artillery fire. When the senior remaining officer surrendered on 1 November, the battle for Manchuria was over.<sup>29</sup>

Overnight prices in Shanghai rose four- or fivefold. On the international market the gold yuan sank to a tenth of its original value. A wave of defeatism swept nationalist China. The United States began to ship out the wives and children of its military personnel and advised its citizens as far south as Nanjing and Shanghai to evacuate the area. All over the country panic set in, as an army of 750,000 communist fighters, reinforced with tanks, heavy artillery and other weapons captured from the nationalists, marched across the frozen plains of Manchuria through the Great Wall in a southward thrust against Beijing.

General Fu Zuoyi, the nationalist commander in the north, stood little chance as the communists swiftly moved to cut the railway lifelines along the Northern Corridor, which stretched from Kalgan to the port of Dagu. They surrounded Tianjin, China's third largest city, in November 1948, and soon forced Fu Zuoyi to pull his troops back inside the walls of Beijing. Lin Biao drew a siege ring around the city and cut off electricity and water supplies. Within a week the airfields outside the city walls were in communist hands. Soon a strange silence set in over the imperial capital, only occasionally disturbed by shell explosions or machine-gun bursts. At first Fu, one of the most distinguished military leaders in the war against Japan, seemed determined to defend Beijing. Trenches were dug and street barricades hastily erected as soldiers went from house to house commandeering billets. To al-



low cargo planes to deliver supplies, an airstrip was built on the polo ground of the old legation quarter, in the very heart of the ancient city. In the freezing winter, gangs of padded-gowned forced labour pulled down telephone poles, trees and even buildings on the approach to the runway. Martial rule was imposed. Lorries with teams of policemen and soldiers carrying sub-machine guns and broad swords careened through the streets, reminding the population of their military presence. Outside the city walls, thousands of homes were needlessly levelled, ostensibly to provide a good field of fire for the defending troops.<sup>30</sup>

But everybody in Beijing knew what had happened to Changchun, turned into a ‘city of death’ by the very general who was now camping outside the city walls. Fu Zuoyi fell into a depression, tormented by the prospect of seeing Beijing, the cultural heart of China, desecrated for no good reason. At first he asked Chiang for permission to resign, but when the Generalissimo refused, he resumed the secret negotiations he had opened with the People’s Liberation Army through his daughter, who was a member of the communist party. After a forty-day siege, a surrender document was signed on 22 January 1949. All of the 240,000 troops under Fu were absorbed into the communist army. The treatment that he and his troops received served as an inducement to other nationalist commanders and officers to defect.<sup>31</sup>

For eight days the imperial capital seemed to float in a twilight zone, as the nationalists, some of them still armed, wandered about the city freely as it awaited the communists. Very little changed. In this strange vacuum, Beijing celebrated the Chinese New Year as best it could. Shops were crammed with lanterns traditionally placed outside front doors to welcome the New Year – in the shape of lions, brilliant green rabbits or yellow tigers. But Chiang Kai-shek’s portrait on Tiananmen Square was removed.

On 31 January 1949 a vanguard of the People’s Liberation Army finally entered the west gates of Beijing. A lorry opened the procession, its loudspeakers blaring the continuous refrain, ‘Welcome to the Liberation Army on its Arrival in Beiping! Welcome to the People’s Army on its Arrival in Beiping! Congratulations to the People of Beiping on their Liberation!’ Then came the soldiers, marching six abreast in full battle regalia, red-cheeked and seemingly in high spirits. Students followed the soldiers, carrying two large portraits, one of Mao Zedong, the other of Zhu De, commander-in-chief of the army. A military band, more soldiers and government employees closed the parade. Most of Beijing was relieved to have survived the siege, but people were cautious with the soldiers, ‘watching them from the kerbs along their route [and] expressing no emotion more in-

tense than curiosity'. Scattered nationalist troops looked on in silence. Jia Ke, then a young communist soldier, remembers that 'Everyone crowded around our boys as they sat quietly on the ground. They wanted to get a good look at us. They were very curious. I felt very proud.'<sup>32</sup>

The communists had fervent supporters. Dan Ling, a schoolboy of sixteen, was one of them. All classes were cancelled on liberation day, and Dan was among those selected to carry either a banner flag or a star-shaped paper lantern on a sorghum stem to welcome the People's Liberation Army. He joined the crowd with his fellow students at Xidan, an important shopping area a kilometre west of Tiananmen Square. As the crowd swelled with thousands of curious onlookers, the students were pushed back and forth and soon became separated. Dan tried to elbow his way forward but did not manage to catch even a glimpse of the parade. Abandoning his flag, by now torn to shreds, he spotted a trolley bus and climbed on board, the conductor too distracted by the spectacle to notice that he did not have a ticket. His face pressed against the window, Dan saw the rifles, the bayonets, the bandoliers and the simple but neat uniforms devoid of rank insignia. He witnessed the discipline of the troops and was filled with joy.<sup>33</sup>

On Tiananmen Square, a hastily sketched portrait of Mao Zedong was raised. Mao himself only entered the city several months later, driving to the Summer Palace on the outskirts in a bullet-proof Dodge limousine made in Detroit for Chiang Kai-shek's personal use in the 1930s.<sup>34</sup>

While the Northern Corridor was being annexed by Lin Biao, an even more bloody campaign was in progress near Xuzhou. As in Manchuria and in the north, the war hinged on control of the country's arterial railways. Xuzhou was a vital junction where the trunk line running from Beijing southward to Nanjing intersected with the only east-west railway, meandering from the country's far west to the Yellow Sea. Xuzhou was the key to Nanjing, the nationalist capital, as well as to the prosperous Yangzi Valley.

In November 1948 over a million men surged towards Xuzhou in one of the greatest battles in Chinese history, also known as the Huaihai campaign. On their march out of Manchuria, the communists fielded a force of almost 400,000 men who marched past Beijing in the rush towards Xuzhou. Another 200,000 swept in from the neighbouring province of Shandong, where guerrilla fighters controlled large parts of the countryside. The nationalists deployed 400,000 troops in the flat, rich, water-laced plains around the railway junction. The bald and stocky General Chen Yi, commander of the communist troops, swiftly cut all railway lines and subjected

the main airfield to artillery bombardment. Du Yuming, the general who had fought Lin Biao in Manchuria, desperately moved his men over rutted roads and torn-up rail tracks to establish a new line of defence to the east of the city, using the autumn floods to defend the swampy ground to the north and north-west.<sup>35</sup>

Fighting in the countryside was ferocious, as both sides battled for the country's heartland. Nationalists and communists deployed tanks and heavy artillery, while government planes controlled the skies, using cloudless days and nights to wreak havoc on the enemy. Ancient towns with moats and walls were pounded. Orange flashes of shell explosions came from villages caught in the crossfire, leaving behind nothing but wrecked houses, smouldering amid fields sown with winter wheat. In a village just north of Caolaoji, everything had been set ablaze by mortar shells. Amid the smell of burned thatch and straw, children and women poked forlornly through roofless huts and blackened walls. On a slope in front of the ruins, an old woman bundled up in a black padded jacket rocked in silent grief. All her belongings had been lost. As one communist general later reminisced, the People's Liberation Army wiped out village after village with blanket shelling: 'In fighting Du Yuming, we practically flattened the villages, using thousands of shells and countless bombs.' A returning pilot reported that every village in sight was burning: 'the fields were covered with bodies'.<sup>36</sup>

The communists were supported by some 5 million men and women, sometimes even children, conscripted by a tough party leader called Deng Xiaoping: he imposed strict quotas for each village and threatened severe punishment when his orders were not met. These pick-and-shovel crews not only provided logistical support, carrying food and material on their backs to the front, but they were also used as human shields, forced to march in front of the troops. Dense waves of unarmed villagers overwhelmed the nationalists. Lin Jingwu, an ordinary soldier in the trenches, remembered years later that his hands went numb from firing bullets into a sea of civilians. He felt sick at the idea of firing at them and tried to close his eyes, but kept on shooting.<sup>37</sup>

People fled the rust-red plain in droves. Trains packed with refugees rattled past the bodies of men, women and children lying beside the tracks, 'looking like rag dolls'. They had lost their grip and slipped at night from the tops of trains after their hands froze from the cold. The lucky ones – women in ragged tunics with babies on their backs, men clutching bundles of

their remaining possessions – had tied themselves to the train roofs. Others were jammed between the carriages.<sup>38</sup>

Xuzhou was a repeat of Shenyang: uncoordinated troop movements, a confused command structure, constant meddling by the Generalissimo, inaccurate field intelligence and low morale among the soldiers created a disaster. Under relentless fire, the nationalists soon retreated inside Xuzhou, becoming entirely dependent on airdrops to stay alive. They quickly ran out of food. Horses were slaughtered, while civilians scoured the streets for bark and roots. Just outside the city walls, women and children in small villages caught between enemy lines froze to death in their mud huts as there was no fuel for fires. Evacuation planes flying back to Shanghai were crammed with soldiers ‘dying in their blood and excrement’, in the words of one pilot. Panic set in as rumours spread that Chiang had ordered the city to be bombed to prevent any equipment from falling into enemy hands. One by one, the trapped divisions surrendered, as communist loudspeakers boomed out offers of food and shelter. Du Yuming, disguised as an ordinary soldier, was captured as he tried to slip away. By 10 January 1949 the battle was over. The communists had dealt a fatal blow to the nationalists.<sup>39</sup>

Once the north had surrendered, the demise of the nationalists was a foregone conclusion. The communists issued a harsh eight-point proposal for peace on 14 January 1949. Two weeks later, a defeated Chiang Kai-shek, for twenty-two years the dominant figure in China, stepped down. Clad in a simple khaki uniform without insignia, from a small drawing room in the Ministry of National Defence in Nanjing he read a formal statement handing over the peace talks to his vice-president.<sup>40</sup>

But it was too little, too late. Everywhere people were apathetic, beaten down by inflation and heavy taxes, sometimes even openly hostile to the nationalists. Despite a muzzled press, the abuses of an increasingly repressive regime were widely reported. The brutal methods used by the police in the hunt for underground agents in particular alienated large sections of the urban population. A powerful propaganda machine presided over by Zhou Enlai mercilessly exploited every failing of the nationalist regime. In this war of images, the communists managed to project a vision of democracy and social reform, largely because nobody besides a few visiting journalists on guided tours ever managed to spend time in their home territory. But, most of all, people were tired of war. After more than a decade of fear and violence, they craved peace at any cost, even under communism.

The communists, meanwhile, used the peace negotiations to rest and regroup. Along the village roads north of the Yangzi River a steady stream of wheelbarrows and donkey carts were building up food reserves. Engines were being dismantled from lorries and installed on river craft. By the end of March close to a million troops swarmed along the north bank of the river that divided the northern and southern halves of China.

As the communists prepared to cross the Yangzi and take all of China, the British government sent a naval sloop from Shanghai to rescue its citizens stranded in Nanjing, the capital on the south bank of the river. The *Amethyst*, with a five-metre Union Jack painted on each side of its grey steel hull, looked like a quaint reminder of a bygone age, when foreign gunboats policed the waters of the Yangzi. Midway between Shanghai and Nanjing, two artillery shells from the north bank hit the sloop. Crippled, it swung helplessly with the current and ran aground on a mud bank. Two white flags were hoisted but the shelling continued for days on end, killing forty-four sailors. The Royal Navy frigate remained trapped for ten weeks before it managed to slip its chain and escape, as the communists demanded that Britain, the United States and France withdraw their armed forces from all of China. Mao saw in the *Amethyst* the perfect symbol of old China and ordered his troops to 'brook no foreign interference'. The attack on the Royal Navy made headlines around the world. Mao was delighted.<sup>41</sup>

The *Amethyst* incident put foreigners in Shanghai on alert. A few days later the communist troops started their final campaign. Nanjing offered only token resistance as the People's Liberation Army crammed junks, sampans and launches to cross the Yangzi to the sound of bugle calls and martial music. The city was already weakened by large-scale defections of soldiers. Looting by civilians was rampant. In the bustling commercial district of Fuzimiao, shabbily dressed men, women and children pillaged in a good-humoured way, laughing and shouting to each other as they hauled sofas, carpets and bedding from the upper floors of the two-storey villas to the lawns below. 'A grinning soldier, who had thrown away his rifle, gingerly carried off a lamp in each hand. An old woman, her grey hair pulled back in a bun, wearing a ragged black tunic and hobbling away on tiny feet, bound in the old custom, happily carried off four elaborately embroidered cushions.' Everything down to the sash windows and plumbing fixtures was stripped from the Ministry of Communications. The floorboards were broken up for firewood. Crowds besieged the airport, trying to force or bribe their way on to planes, while soldiers swung their bayoneted rifles to

keep them at bay. A nationalist general barked orders at underlings loading a grand piano aboard an aircraft.<sup>42</sup>

With darkness came fear, as the mood on the streets turned ugly. Shooting could be heard in the distance, and then loud explosions rocked the capital. Fire turned the skies deep red, as departing soldiers set alight ammunition and fuel dumps on the banks of the river. In a dilapidated hotel, members of a Peace Preservation Committee sat around small tables drinking tea and composing slogans to welcome the communists: they were in charge of the city and its million civilians, churning out posters appealing to the population to preserve order.<sup>43</sup>

On 23 April columns of PLA soldiers entered the city, sweating in their padded uniforms. The following day they could be seen sitting in orderly formations on their sleeping bags along the pavements, listening to political instructions from their cadres or singing revolutionary songs. Curious crowds gathered to stare at them or bring them hot water, poured into the mugs the soldiers carried on their belts. Neatly dressed students – earnest young men and women – came out of their dormitories, cheering the arrival of the troops, although most of the soldiers ignored them: they were worlds apart. In the Presidential Palace, Chen Yi and Deng Xiaoping took turns sitting in Chiang Kai-shek's chair.<sup>44</sup>

Once the communists had poured across the Yangzi, China's last great defensive barrier, they moved with great speed. Nanjing was taken in four days. Wuhan, the commercial and industrial centre on the middle Yangzi, soon followed. With a rapid eastward thrust towards the coast, they cut the Shanghai–Guangzhou railway. Shanghai, China's financial powerhouse, was isolated. 'Shanghai will be China's Stalingrad,' vowed the general appointed to defend the city. But most people in the permissive city revered as the 'Paris of the East', dreading the destruction a long siege would bring, hoped that the promise would not be kept.<sup>45</sup>

Shanghai's main defence was a wooden fence, 50 kilometres long, made from stakes cut out of lumber originally delivered by a United Nations relief agency. Inside the city a sense of false calm prevailed, as it continued to pulsate with a boisterous life that seemed to deny the approach of the communists. Gambling proceeded apace in the clubs, cabarets and bars along the Bund. On impeccably manicured lawns, British expatriates continued to play cricket or sip their pink gins in the afternoon sun. At Duke Lear's, the Tango or the Rainbow, hostesses perched on bar stools or slouched in armchairs seemed oblivious of the blockade. And despite inflation, everybody seemed to be trading, whether in dollars, in gold bars or by barter.

In an effort to avoid the looting that had taken place in Nanjing, martial law was declared. Firing squads executed suspected communist agents, black marketeers and other culprits on the outskirts of the city. Before the victims were lined up and shot in the back of the head by the nationalists, they were paraded through Shanghai's busy streets, standing on the back of a lorry with white placards explaining their crimes. Elsewhere, on outlying roads, hundreds of labourers were conscripted to throw up machine-gun emplacements, barbed-wire entanglements and earthworks. At sandbagged sentry posts along main intersections, soldiers poked their bayonets into the bags and bundles of refugees entering the city. A Victory Parade was organised to boost morale, as lorries raced through the streets with workers and students shouting their allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek. From the top floor of Broadway Mansions, Shanghai's tallest apartment building, tenants could see sharp flashes of cannon fire across the Huangpu River. The glow of burning villages appeared further to the north. Here and there tracer shells streaked lines of red across the horizon.<sup>46</sup>

As Chen Yi and his soldiers moved closer into nearby farming areas, fresh vegetables disappeared from the wet markets and sidewalk stands. The siege also forced fishermen to keep their boats idle at the docks. The price of yellow croaker, the city's most popular staple, jumped six times in one day before the fish vanished altogether from the stalls. Crowds thronged around the rice shops, anxious about spiralling inflation and dwindling supplies. The mayor publicly appealed to everyone to plant victory gardens.<sup>47</sup>

After a weary wait of several weeks, Shanghai fell to the communists on 25 May. Barely a shot was fired, as the business community and the triads had quietly switched sides. The nationalists were seen in full retreat, some of the troops marching almost in parade formation, others streaking through the city in terror and confusion, caked with mud from the battlefield. In the red-light district, fleeing soldiers desperately searched the shops for second-hand clothing; the streets were strewn with discarded uniforms. A day later, in the middle of the night, small groups of soldiers under Chen Yi's command began filtering through the French Concession in the south-west. Then they advanced cautiously down the pavements of Avenue Joffre and Great Western Road, hugging buildings closely for protection against the occasional fire from isolated nationalist snipers. By the morning they had reached the Bund.

Shanghai heaved a sigh of relief. There was no looting, raping or requisitioning. As in other cities, the soldiers were on their best behaviour, sleep-



ing on the pavement and refusing even offers of water from sympathetic residents. They seemed more like an army of adolescents than the surly, bellicose soldiers portrayed in anti-communist propaganda. Mariano Ezpeleta, the consul-general of the Philippines, was struck by their youth:

Here they were, the Communist soldiers – mostly teenagers in the first blush of youth, slightly built boys still awkward in gait; others, almost adult country bumpkins trying to steady themselves first on one foot, then on the other. They stood on street crossings, casually held their carbine at rest, looking around open-eyed, obviously bewildered by the ornate and magnificent buildings of the city. One could mistake them for curious cadets from some rural inland town learning their primary lessons in the art of sentinel duty.<sup>48</sup>

Newspapers carried stories on the good behaviour of the soldiers. The *Impartial Daily* in Shanghai trumpeted: ‘Public transportation facilities have been restored, and there is not a single soldier of the Liberation Army who rides the vehicles without buying a ticket, and there are no attempts to disturb the ordinary queues in order to have prior access to the vehicles.’ Similar stories were widely reported and offered reassurance to apprehensive city dwellers.<sup>49</sup>

The population were relieved. They continued to call the soldiers derogatory names and circulated yokel jokes about them. One anecdote described a team who found a white porcelain toilet and tried to wash rice in it. A soldier pulled the rope attached to the cistern, only to look on aghast as the rice vanished with the bubbles in the bowl. At the opulent Cathay Hotel, country bumpkins played with the elevators and tied up their mules in the lobby. Not all such tales were inventions. Feng Bingxing, a veteran who was twenty-five years old when he marched into Shanghai, remembered: ‘We tried to light cigarettes with light bulbs and wash rice in toilet bowls. You know, many of our officers and soldiers came from rural areas and hadn’t seen such things when we first arrived in Shanghai.’<sup>50</sup>

Within a day banners went up near the American Club, proclaiming ‘Welcome to the People’s Liberation Army’. A huge portrait of Mao Zedong was hoisted over the Great World Amusement Centre, Shanghai’s seething six-floor recreational building. Red flags fluttered over shop doorways, and lorries decked with red banners carried students and workers jubilantly waving pennants. Even as machine guns still rattled in the distance, communist songs blared from loudspeakers in the city centre. One day after Shanghai’s fall, trams and buses started running again in parts of the city. Their new allegiance indicated by red armbands, policemen were back on the streets directing traffic. ‘On street corners, hawkers clinked their wares

once more, and sidewalk vegetable stands, bare for almost a week, filled up again quickly with produce from the countryside.’<sup>51</sup>

With Nanjing and Shanghai under communist control, those nationalist troops who had not yet surrendered continued their withdrawal further south. Guangzhou, the commercial hub and southern port near colonial Hong Kong, was the city where Sun Yat-sen had first set up a nationalist government after the fall of the empire in 1911. Most of the generals fighting each other in the civil war had been trained at the Whampoa Military Academy, established in 1924. For a few brief weeks, Guangzhou became a boom town, seat of the provisional capital of the nationalists. Officials of the Soviet Union, the first foreign legation to flee when communist troops approached Nanjing, were ensconced on the sixth floor of the Oi Kwan Hotel, a modern art deco building towering high above the Bund. The tenth floor housed American diplomats. The nationalists took up most of the other floors as their headquarters. Further down the Bund, on Shameen Island, government officials bought up plush Western-style homes shaded by banyan trees. As new arrivals vied for the few remaining houses and apartments, cash deposits for a tiny two-room flat shot up to US\$4,000. On the outskirts of the city, the poor lived in shoddy houses thrown up almost overnight. The city was creaking under the extra load of a mushrooming population.<sup>52</sup>

The boom was brief. After a pause of a few weeks the communists resumed their march. When Guangzhou fell on 14 October 1949, ‘with scarcely more than a quiet sigh’, the communists completed a 3,500-kilometre march that had started with the fall of Changchun one year earlier.<sup>53</sup> After a hasty and chaotic retreat to Chongqing, on 10 December Chiang Kai-shek flew to Taiwan, never to return.

As the communists drove south towards Guangzhou, another army followed the railway west of Xuzhou. Ahead lay a vast borderland with frontiers that touched on Tibet, India, Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of Mongolia. The region was sparsely populated by some 13 million people, less than 3 per cent of the estimated total in China. Deserts, mountains, steppes and lakes formed a harsh but beautiful landscape, hiding valuable resources in oil, coal, gold, wolfram, uranium and

other rare-earth metals. A Muslim belt ran through the north-west, with mosques located in all major settlements where Arabic was used in religious services. One visitor noted in 1948: 'The men's skull caps and the women's hoods are identifying marks, of course, but their facial features are quite recognizable also. Their noses are larger and their eyes rounder than those of the typical Chinese, and the men wear luxuriant beards which are distinctive because of their bushy sideburns.'<sup>54</sup>

Many other groups contributed to an extremely heterogeneous population, nowhere more so than in Xinjiang, the westernmost province bordering on Central Asia. In this grazing land cut up by vast deserts and snow-capped mountains, waves of invasion and migration had left behind Uighurs, Kazaks, Chinese, Taranchis, Kirghiz, Mongols, White Russians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Tatars and Manchus, among others. The Uighurs, 'with their many-coloured, embroidered skull caps, jackets and leather boots', were by far the most dominant group in Xinjiang, accounting for three-quarters of a population of 4 million. Relations between these different people could be bitter, at times violent, in particular in the nineteenth century when revolts against the Qing empire had flared up and obliged the Manchus to reconquer the entire region. Not until 1884 was Xinjiang fully incorporated into the empire.<sup>55</sup>

The north-west had some of the most efficient provincial regimes in the country, a stark contrast to what happened elsewhere under the nationalists. Ma Bufang, a trim, burly Muslim general, used an authoritarian hand to transform Qinghai, lining the smooth, metalled highways with willow and poplar saplings, cleaning up the cities, irrigating the countryside and building hospitals and medical facilities. In Xining, the capital, one-third of the population went to school; food, clothing and tuition were provided free to all students. Qinghai thrived when most of China was crushed by civil war.<sup>56</sup>

But Ma Bufang was no match for the army that was moving along the railway from Xuzhou. Peng Dehuai, a stout man with a shaven head and the face of a bulldog, led some 150,000 troops against Ma's cavalry of 40,000 armed Muslim horsemen, dashing all nationalist hopes in the region. Lanzhou, the gateway to the north-west on the ancient silk road, fell in August 1949, leading to communist control of the Yumen oilfields.

Xinjiang was soon within reach. It had a troubled history of ethnic strife, made no easier by a significant Soviet presence. In exchange for trading privileges and concessions for oilwells, tin and wolfram mines, Soviet forces had repeatedly helped Sheng Shicai, governor of the province from 1933 to 1944, to repress local rebellions. In November 1940 the Soviet

Union, which needed a buffer state against Japan, took virtual control of the region. Sheng Shicai, who feared that Xinjiang might otherwise share the fate of Poland, invaded and carved up several years earlier by Stalin and Hitler, signed an agreement granting additional concessions for fifty years. At the end of the war, Chiang Kai-shek successfully negotiated an end to the Soviet presence in Xinjiang as part of the Sino-Soviet Treaty. He also compromised with the Kazaks and Uighurs, agreeing to a coalition government in which the nationalists shared power with representatives of the Eastern Turkestan Republic, a political entity established by rebels with Soviet assistance in the northern part of the province.

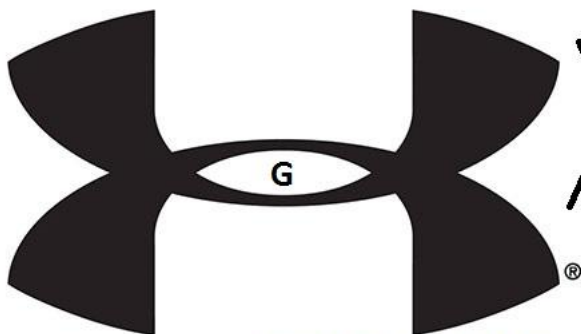
The communists subdued Xinjiang through a combination of conquest and negotiation. First Mao Zedong invited five of the key leaders of the Eastern Turkestan Republic to Beijing to attend a Political Consultative Conference. On 22 August 1949 Stalin ordered them to co-operate with Mao. Two days later, they boarded a plane in Kazakhstan and headed for Beijing. The plane crashed near Lake Baikal, killing all on board. Speculation was rife, some suspecting that they had been liquidated on Stalin's orders in a secret deal brokered with Mao. The remaining leaders agreed to include their republic within the province of Xinjiang and accepted key positions in the new People's Republic of China. Then, in October, Peng Dehuai surrounded Urumqi, the provincial capital, forcing the nationalists to surrender. Xinjiang was liberated, but by now Peng was running out of steam. On 29 December 1949 he wrote to Mao to explain that he was bankrupt and could no longer feed his troops. 'I reckon that huge help from the Soviet Union is indispensable in solving our present difficulties and in the future building of Xinjiang.' Within weeks Soviet traders, engineers and advisers were swarming all over the region. Convoys of lorries with Russian troops in full winter clothing rumbled through the streets of Urumqi by night.<sup>57</sup>

Tibet had to wait for its liberation. Lhasa expelled a nationalist delegation in July 1949 and a few months later sent a letter to the US State Department indicating that it intended to defend itself by 'all possible means' against communist intrusion. Copies of the letter were sent to London and Beijing. Beijing waited. Negotiations were opened. Offers were made. As Lhasa deliberated, 40,000 communist troops entered Tibet on 7 October 1950, striking towards the 4,000-metre passes into the bleak Tibetan plateau. They wiped out all armed opposition at Chamdo, placing the weak theocratic government under their control. India, independent since 1947, had just recognised the People's Republic. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had championed communist China, assuring the world that the Tibetan issue

would be settled peacefully. Now China controlled all the major passes through the Himalayas into India and Nepal. Britain remained neutral, having lost interest in the region as a buffer zone since India had become independent. The United Nations did not intervene: they had their hands full with the Korean War.<sup>58</sup>

The communists had now successfully established their borders along the territory reached by the Qing empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Just as the Bolsheviks inherited a realm conquered by the tsars, so the communists could now start building on the empire won by the Manchus. Only Hong Kong and Taiwan still eluded the reach of the People's Republic.<sup>59</sup>

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## Part Two

# Takeover (1949–52)

# Walmart



## Liberation

Liberation began with fanfare. Communist rule in every important town was inaugurated with a carefully choreographed procession. Soldiers invariably opened the parade, followed by a lorry bearing a huge portrait of Mao Zedong. Dance troupes dressed in blue, red and green dresses and silk scarves, waving red flags and wearing white-towel turbans, performed a traditional harvest dance called ‘rice-sprout song’ (*yangge*), swaying their bodies to the music played by waist drums, heavy gongs and trumpets. The fluid dance movements were supposed to celebrate peasants in daily activities such as sowing grain or carrying water with shoulder poles. Here, it seemed, was a form of art by the people for the people, to be seen in every procession and at every meeting.

Even in the north, where the rice-sprout song was popular, ordinary farmers would have been puzzled by the way the troupes performed the folk dance. Some of the melodies no longer had anything to do with local folksong but were borrowed instead from the Soviet army. The traditional lyrics, like folk plays everywhere in the world, were often bawdy and downright obscene, telling stories of love and betrayal, but now they celebrated the abolition of the unequal treaties and the victory of the People’s Liberation Army. The traditionally complex dance steps had been simplified into three or four basic movements. A cast of traditional characters, from fortune-tellers and henpecked husbands to priests, squires and immortals, were replaced by workers, soldiers and peasants. But in many parts of China traditional rice-sprout songs meant little to ordinary people. In Xi’an, spectators were unable to identify any of the characters in the parade, as they had nothing to do with local opera. ‘The only thing that was the same was the ear-splitting banging of the gongs and drums, which reverberated throughout the city so often that most days seemed like New Year’s, an audible sign that times had changed.’ Many onlookers, nonetheless, enjoyed the festivities, as the celebratory sounds announced the end of war.<sup>1</sup>

In the large cities along the coast, these political rallies were much bigger affairs. On 6 July 1949 tanks and howitzers rumbled up Nanking Road, the heart of the shopping district in Shanghai, followed by armies of workers thrusting



their clenched fists into the air in the pouring rain. Some companies sent lorries loaded with workers. One Shell Oil Company lorry had a huge papier-mâché capitalist holding a gigantic \$5 bill. Others carried groups of female students in neat white blouses and half-length cotton slacks, chanting to the beat of gongs. A few weeks earlier identical lorries had driven through the streets to celebrate the Victory Parade for Chiang Kai-shek. The same faces shouted themselves hoarse again, but this time they shouted for the communists.<sup>2</sup>

The most important rally of all was held in Beijing on 1 October, as Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the Central People's Government at a founding ceremony attended by 300,000 people. Preparatory work started early. Tiananmen Square, like most of the imperial capital, looked derelict after long years of neglect during the civil war. It was much smaller than today, cluttered with medieval walls, old roads and dilapidated buildings that once served as resting places for officials awaiting an audience with the emperor in the Imperial Palace, also called the Forbidden City. The pitted surface of the square was littered with rubbish. Thistles and errant trees shot up from the cracks in the paving slabs.<sup>3</sup>

Dan Ling was one of those students who eagerly volunteered to help clean up the square. In reward for his hard work, he was allowed to watch the parade. He arrived early on the day of the ceremony, waiting outside the gate in the bitter cold. Drizzle set in after dawn. Once all his fellow students had arrived, they queued up and marched in formation, together with other groups, locating their assigned position on the square. They found it pock-marked with deep pits that had not yet been levelled. Dan and the students sheltered in these pits, huddling closely together to stay warm.<sup>4</sup>

Thousands of banners fluttered in the autumn breeze above a sea of people carefully selected from all walks of life. Li Zhisui, a twenty-nine-year-old doctor who had returned to China from a job in Australia after reading how the communists had taken over Beijing, the city of his birth, without firing a shot, joined the crowds in shouting slogans: 'Long Live the Chinese Communist Party!', 'Long Live the People's Republic of China!', 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' They also sang revolutionary songs.

At ten o'clock sharp, Mao Zedong and the other leaders appeared on a reviewing stand on the great Tiananmen gate, to the south of the Forbidden City. He electrified an already excited crowd. For many, it was their first glimpse of China's messiah. Mao was fifty-six years old, tall, healthy, with a ruddy face. His voice was powerful and clear, and he spoke with decisive gestures. He no longer sported the military uniform in which he

had so often appeared in photographs, but instead wore a dark-brown Sun Yat-sen suit, soon to be called the Mao suit. A worker's cap covered his thick black hair, revealing a broad and high forehead. In a message of unity and democracy, he stood together with several non-communist political personalities, including Song Qingling, also known as Madame Sun Yat-sen. Although her sister was married to Chiang Kai-shek, during the civil war she had sided with the communists and was now a figurehead for a united front. But Mao was the centre of attention. To many onlookers he was a truly magnetic force. In a soft, almost lilting voice, he spoke in a strong Hunanese accent, which most Chinese speakers found relatively easy to understand. The effect of his speech was riveting: 'The central government of the People's Republic of China is established!' he proclaimed, as the crowd went wild, shouting more slogans and erupting in thunderous applause. Li almost cried: 'I was so full of joy that my heart nearly burst out of my throat, and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so proud of China, so full of hope, so happy that the exploitation and suffering, the aggression from foreigners, would be gone forever. I had no doubt that Mao was the great leader of the revolution, the maker of a new Chinese history.'<sup>5</sup>

For Dan Ling the most exciting part of the day was the military rally. Troupes danced to the drum and gong beat of the rice-sprout song, and stilt walkers cavorted merrily in colourful costumes above the heads of the crowds. But the army was the centre of the procession, with some 16,400 soldiers in infantry and mounted cavalry, tanks, armoured cars and lorries equipped with machine guns. As the People's Liberation Army paraded across Tiananmen, a few aeroplanes roared overhead in a display of unity and military might. The cadenced tread of soldiers was followed by serried ranks of workers, students and government employees, many carrying coloured paper banners and Mao Zedong portraits, a few of which were torn to tatters by the wind. Dan and his friends stood in the rain for more than ten hours, without food, water or shelter, but nonetheless elated.<sup>6</sup>

The following day Dan Ling came down with diarrhoea, which lasted a month and weakened him so badly that it almost took his life. Dan had first encountered the communist party in 1947, when he was fourteen years old. The nationalists referred to the communists as 'bandits', which only enhanced their prestige in the boy's eyes. Outlaws, in folk legends, were often heroes fighting corrupt government officials. Several communist party members were arrested and imprisoned in a courtyard near Dan's home, and sometimes the prisoners were allowed out, singing and putting on plays that

impressed Dan and other boys from the neighbourhood. He idolised them, believing that poor people in liberated areas were able to eat their fill and enjoyed equal treatment. One day Dan and two other boys decided to join the communists, who were rumoured to have a stronghold in the mountains to the west of Beijing. Equipped with some food, water and a knife, the boys slipped away in the evening, stumbling across desolate fields and eerie graveyards in the dark. They spent the night in a small village, quickly exhausted their food supply and finally decided to abandon their mission. Dan's escapade only heightened his enthusiasm for the communists. A year later, during the siege of Beijing, wounded nationalist soldiers swarmed all over the city. Some of them bullied people, intimidating even the local police. As the communist troops camping outside the capital cut off the food supply, cargo planes delivered badly needed provisions by parachute. The soldiers fought each other to reach the airdropped packets.

Dan had a vision of communist abundance that a visit to a picture exhibition of Soviet life had only reinforced. He was struck by a painting of a worker's family: beaming parents and rosy-cheeked children sat at a dinner table overflowing with eggs, bread, meat and other kinds of food he could not even name. Dan boasted about the exhibition, posing as an expert on Soviet life and trying to win converts for the cause among family and friends. His parents were lukewarm, maybe because a life of hard work had dulled their imagination, but his two younger brothers drooled over the idea of plenty for all. Dan joined the party aged fifteen, motivated by youthful ignorance and the promise of food.<sup>2</sup>

Li Zhisui, the twenty-nine-year-old doctor, grew up patriotic and proud of his country's culture, literature, art and history. He was enticed by a job as a ship's surgeon in Australia to escape civil war in 1948, but could stay there only temporarily as the country had strict immigration rules that favoured 'whites only'. Living in a small boarding house, his pride crying out against the country's racist policies, he slowly drifted into a state of depression. He rented a house in Hong Kong for his wife, but did not want to live there either, as he was too proud to become the disfranchised subject of an alien king in the crown colony.

Liberation jolted him out of his depression. Li was thrilled when he read about the communist victory, and believed that China would at long last assume its rightful place in the world. When he saw the headlines about the *Amethyst* incident, he immediately interpreted it as a victory against imperialist incursions. After his brother had written to him from Beijing asking him to return, his patriotism was rekindled and he decided to go home. He

believed that the united front with non-party intellectuals was real: 'I worshipped the party. It was the hope of new China. I had been like a blind man in Australia, with no idea where I was going. The united front policy had shown me the light.'<sup>8</sup>

Many other Chinese overseas answered the call to serve the motherland. In Hong Kong underground agents took batches of people across the border to Guangzhou. The journey was arduous. The new recruits were asked to dress like farmers and meet in a designated spot near the border. From there they followed their guide on foot across hills and rivers to the liberated areas in Dongjiang. For many, hoisting the red flag was a highlight of the trek. 'My eyes were moist with tears as I saw our flag run up the flag pole.' A group photo was taken to commemorate the occasion. Wong Yee Sheung, educated at the Diocesan Girls' School in Hong Kong, changed her name to Huang Xing, meaning Yellow Star. Hundreds of others marched with her, stopping at local schools on the way and sleeping on the ground in neat straight rows in the classrooms. After seven days they reached Guangzhou, where they were housed ten to a room in the East Asia Hotel. Across the street, the Oi Kwan Hotel, where the nationalists had set up their headquarters only months before, was decorated with a long banner hanging from the roof: 'The Chinese People Have Stood Up'.<sup>9</sup>

Hong Kong became a great crossroads. Crowds arrived from abroad to join the revolution while refugees poured into the crown colony, clamouring for a haven from the advancing communists. People from all walks of life fled China, taking with them their skills and capital. Dr T. V. Soong, who had negotiated the Sino-Soviet Treaty in 1945, disembarked in Hong Kong, welcomed by a guard of honour. General Long Yun, the former Yunnan warlord, landed with his entourage, but would soon return to China as a leading government official.

Like Soong and Long, most of these refugees were only passing through Hong Kong, soon resettling in South-east Asia, the United States, Latin America or elsewhere. But approximately 1 million people decided to stay. Some were prosperous industrialists who brought entire mills with them and tied their fate to the crown colony. The majority were craftsmen, shopkeepers, farmers and paupers who had crossed the border with little more than the clothes on their backs. Hundreds of thousands begged and roamed the streets, living in huts built of mud, wood, bamboo, sheet-metal, tar-paper and other materials in the hills of Hong Kong and Kowloon. Another 40,000 were street sleepers who managed to claim a space under a veranda or in a basement, living and cooking in the open. Others built squatter huts

on rooftops. Those who were slightly better off shared cubicles in tenement houses, each family having just a few square metres. Among the refugees were several thousand soldiers, many crippled and disabled. The regime in Taiwan viewed them as a security risk and refused them entry. After months of surviving in a shanty town clinging to Mount Davis, they were settled at Rennie's Mill by the Social Welfare Office, living in large tents and tin sheds. The place soon became known as Little Taiwan.<sup>10</sup>

Another 1 to 2 million refugees also crossed the Taiwan Straits, following Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists. Many of them were deeply traumatised. Families were often divided, as soldiers and government officials had left some of the women and children behind in the rush to escape. Ying Meijun, for instance, bade farewell to her one-year-old son at a railway station in September 1949. The boy was crying so much that she left him in the care of his grandmother, fearful of taking him on an overcrowded train. She would not see her first-born child again until 1987, when he was a forty-year-old man broken by years of hard labour on a state farm. As a young child, he used to chase trains along the tracks in front of their home, thinking that his mother was on board. For hundreds of thousands of refugees, all contact with friends and relatives was lost, and for three decades many did not even know who on the mainland was still alive. Their sense of isolation was compounded by the hostility they encountered from the local population. In a massacre known as the 228 Incident in 1947, the nationalists had slaughtered thousands of unarmed demonstrators who protested against the corruption and oppression of the post-war regime. Martial law and a reign of terror followed, creating deep divisions between mainlanders and the Taiwanese for decades to come.<sup>11</sup>

On the mainland the bamboo curtain soon came down, ending one of the largest human migrations in Chinese history. But the vast majority of the population were neither enthusiastic supporters nor diehard opponents of the new regime. Most had little choice but to stay, watching liberation and the fanfare that followed with a mixture of relief, hope and wariness.

After the celebrations came the police. They were less friendly than the soldiers. They did the rounds, inviting themselves into people's homes in their search for forbidden items, from weapons to radios. The policeman who harassed Kang Zhengguo's family in Xi'an had a shabby uniform and a heavy northern Shaanxi accent. 'We always served him tea in the parlour, but he seemed unaccustomed to smooth cedar chairs, and after sitting for

a while, he would shift to a squatting position right on his chair, without even taking off his shoes.’ He was interested in the family’s vacuum-tube radio. The police suspected that the device was used to send wireless telegrams rather than receive broadcasts. The head of the Kang household was repeatedly summoned to the police station for questioning. Exasperated, he eventually surrendered the device.<sup>12</sup>

All over China the police visited people suspected of being sympathetic to the old regime. In big cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan, special teams trained to take over public security arrived within days of liberation. After briefing by underground members of the communist party, they moved into the precinct stations and police headquarters and ordered everybody to stay at their posts. General Chen Yi, now the new mayor of Shanghai, replaced his peaked cap with a dark beret, exhorting the police force in a three-hour meeting, an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth: they should ‘reform themselves, and at the same time carry on their work without undue anxieties’, he explained.<sup>13</sup>

The communists had little choice but to ask former government servants and puppet policemen to stay on. In each department – the post office, the city hall, the police headquarters – some of the top officials of the old regime slipped away while a few new faces appeared. These were the party cadres, charged with overseeing the takeover:

The typical bureaucrat of the regime in his blue or khaki uniform, like a soldier’s, topped by a cloth cap which he often wears even in the office, resembles a Soviet Commissar much more than a Chinese official. He lives frugally . . . He is a poor man and is clothed, fed and housed by the party. His tobacco and his soap are given to him on the official ration, and he hardly earns enough in a month to buy himself a pair of shoddy sandals. He sleeps on the floor, and in requisitioned European buildings he rejects the soft mattresses that would prevent him from sleeping. He is distant with strangers and, apart from those few men who are appointed to deal with ‘foreign relations’, he is inaccessible. He insists that other Chinese speak to him in the Peking tongue, now more than ever the official language of the whole country, and not in the local dialect of Shanghai or elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

Former employees of the old government continued to perform most of the daily routines. In 1945 the nationalist police had begun registering households and handing out identity cards in the cities under their control. A household was not just a family: it could include any collective unit like a factory dormitory or a hospital department. The new regime now took over the system of household registration, initially decried by the communists as ‘fascist’, but gave it a new twist. Food-ration cards were entrusted to the head of each household – a family head, a factory manager or a temple’s

abbot – and that person was now made responsible for reporting all changes in the constitution of the household. The rationing and distribution of food on the basis of the registration system entailed a staggering amount of paperwork, as each police station had to issue ration coupons several times a month. But it ensured that the state could reach into each and every household as never before.<sup>15</sup>

On top of household registration, every individual was given a class label (*chengfen*), including his or her ‘family background’, ‘occupation’ and ‘individual status’. There were roughly sixty of these labels, which were further divided into broader class categories. These, in turn, were ranked as ‘good’, ‘middle’ and ‘bad’ on the basis of their presumed loyalty towards the revolution:

Good classes:

Revolutionary cadres

Revolutionary soldiers

Revolutionary martyrs

Industrial workers

Poor and lower-middle peasants

Middle classes:

The petty bourgeoisie

Middle peasants

Intellectuals and professionals

Bad classes:

Landlords

Rich peasants

Capitalists

These class designations would soon be simplified into two opposites: red or black, friend or foe. They would determine a person’s fate for decades to come, as children inherited the status of the head of the household.<sup>16</sup>

The police first arrested the regime’s most obvious enemies – presumed war criminals, heads of secret societies, prominent leaders of the old regime who had not yet absconded. But soon those belonging to ‘bad classes’ became suspects, as the communists tried to hunt down hidden enemies of the revolution, undercover agents and enemy spies. China, after all, remained at war. Despite all the victory parades, the last parts of the mainland were not liberated until the end of 1950. The nationalists controlled most of the country’s territorial waters, and imposed a blockade on all ports from the summer of 1949 onwards. They used their air force to bomb thousands of



junks and sampans assembled along south China's coast for an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, and carried out bombing raids against cities along the coast, from Shanghai all the way to Guangzhou, causing hundreds of casualties even though their targets were supposed to be military and industrial in nature. Arms, ammunition, food and other vital supplies were flown to guerrilla troops operating in Guangxi and other parts of the country. Secret agents seemed to be working ceaselessly, even though they were often captured, while special forces from Taiwan carried out commando raids along the coast, fuelling popular rumours of an impending invasion by Chiang Kai-shek.

A curfew was imposed in the cities. In Shanghai, cars and other vehicles were banned from the streets after 9 p.m. and pedestrians after 11 p.m. Sentinels were stationed at every street corner with rifles and bayonets.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers and radio relentlessly publicised the underground activities of the dreaded enemy, while propaganda posters exhorted the population to vigilance. The enemy seemed to be everywhere. In Tianjin a common slogan was 'Liberate the Entire Country and Capture the People's Enemy Chiang Kai-shek Alive'.<sup>18</sup>

People were encouraged to write to the police or the newspapers. Neighbours and friends denounced each other, often in the hope of reward. Almost overnight half the population seemed to have become communist. 'Everybody claimed to be a guerrilla, a soaking-red partisan,' noted a foreign observer in Shanghai, as people scrambled to prove their allegiance to the new regime.<sup>19</sup> Those belonging to 'bad classes' were visited by the police, interrogated about their past, quizzed about their links with foreigners and sometimes subjected to house searches in the hunt for suspect documents or concealed weapons. Soon even possession of an innocuous radio began to seem suspicious. In Shanghai alone, thousands of sets were confiscated, as well as guns and ammunition.

There were no mass executions: these would come later. But behind the scenes, the new regime's most dangerous enemies were quietly gaoled or executed. Others were registered, interrogated and kept under surveillance. In Shanghai, several hundred so-called 'counter-revolutionaries' – spies, underground agents, criminal bosses – were shot in the months after December 1949. In Hebei province, away from the inquisitive gaze of on-lookers, more than 20,000 suspects were executed in the first year of liberation. Soon, the killing rate would rocket everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Yet for the time being even people with dubious backgrounds, from the regime's point of view, remained largely undisturbed. Most of the profes-

sionals – professors, clerks, bankers, lawyers, managers, doctors, engineers – were too vital to a regime trying to establish its authority and build up the economy. But the time for laughter and song was over. All of them were sent to schools to learn the new orthodoxy. Everywhere, in government offices, factories, workshops, schools and universities, people were being ‘re-educated’, poring over official pamphlets, magazines, newspapers and textbooks and learning the new doctrine. ‘Everyone is learning the right answers, the right ideas and the right slogans.’ It was called ‘brainwashing’ (*xiniao*). From Beijing to Guangzhou, cities became giant adult-education centres. Banks, big shops and commercial offices had their own dedicated libraries. People were asked to transform themselves into what the communists called ‘New People’.<sup>21</sup>

Those with a suspect past had to write confessions, admitting all their personal faults and past mistakes. Sometimes a simple admission of wrongdoing could suffice, while more serious public recantations appeared in the newspapers controlled by the party. A few were summoned to appear before large audiences where they were forced to recount their sins and express contrition for them for hours on end. Another weapon was discussion. Recalcitrant individuals were worn down by interminable debates. Some were locked up in their offices and visited by a steady stream of cadres and political instructors determined to break down all resistance and win the argument. In every case the admission of guilt was added to the person’s dossier, which would follow him for the rest of his life.

More vulnerable were classes of people the regime perceived as threats to social order and drains on its resources. They were called ‘lumpenproletariat’ in Marxist parlance, but ‘parasites’ and ‘trash’ by the cadres who had to deal with them: paupers, beggars, pickpockets and prostitutes, but also the millions of refugees and the unemployed who had come to seek shelter in the cities during the civil war. Many urban residents, who craved a return to social order after the chaotic years of civil war, welcomed these measures. Some, however, feared that the cities might be emptied.<sup>22</sup>

In Beijing, the communist troops charged with taking over the prisons found most of them empty. To save food and heat, the municipal authorities had ordered the large-scale release of inmates a few months earlier. On the streets of the capital, some beggars thought that they were quite literally ‘liberated’: they roved the streets killing dogs, smashing windows and blackmailing shopowners, with some of them managing to make the equivalent of 8 to 10 kilos of grain a day. Rickshaw pullers, on the other hand,

took 'liberation' as a licence to flout the traffic regulations, causing mayhem on the streets. Thousands of them were rounded up and confined in makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city. By the end of 1949, some 4,600 vagrants languished in re-education centres and government reformatories.<sup>23</sup>

Like everybody else, they were asked to reflect on their sins, study the new orthodoxy and learn a different trade. Many made the best of their internment, but others sank into depression, despite all the propaganda about their 'liberation'. As one report noted, 'because they feel so miserable and unhappy they feign madness, act crazy and attempt to run away. There are even some small children who cry all the time, begging to be allowed to go home.' A few refused to be re-educated. Liu Guoliao, enrolled in a training course for vagrants, was a proud man, stubbornly proclaiming, 'My head is made of steel, bones and cement. It is beyond reform.'<sup>24</sup>

Conditions in the reformatories were often dreadful. Abuse was rife. In the western suburbs of Beijing, guards stole food and clothing and regularly beat the people they were meant to reform. As a detailed investigation brought to light, some of the children in detention were sodomised. The nurses could be careless, sometimes even brutal, particularly when using syringes. People died every month, the death rate being especially high among the elderly.<sup>25</sup>

In Shanghai too, thousands of thieves, vagrants and rickshaw pullers were arrested and sent to labour camps. Arrests came in waves. In a mere three days in December 1949 more than 5,000 beggars and pickpockets were arrested and deported to custody centres. Many were selected for re-education and sent to training units, but large numbers also ended up in prison. In Tilanqiao, as Ward Road Gaol was now known, by May 1951 over 3,000 undesirable elements had been imprisoned or sent to labour camps in the countryside. Several dozen were executed or died in custody.<sup>26</sup>

People who eked out a living as pedlars and hawkers were also cleared from the streets. In republican China, all manner of goods were delivered to the door, usually carried in baskets, swung from shoulder poles or carted on wheelbarrows, occasionally in donkey panniers. Each hawker had his own peculiar chant or mechanical rattle to advertise his wares. Vendors and itinerant traders also stood on pavement corners, offering every possible item from local fruit and vegetables, cloth, crockery, baskets, coal, meat, toys, sweets and nuts to soap, socks, handkerchiefs and towels.<sup>27</sup>

Within months they were rounded up, questioned and sent back to their home villages. A few were allowed to remain, but prohibited from roaming the streets. Open-air markets were organised where they were assigned

stalls to sell their wares. One such market in Tianjin was on a tract of wasteland. A vast marquee built with bamboo went up in two days, and in another day the whole place was walled and roofed with matting. Pitches were marked out and tables and benches appeared. A funfair was organised to attract buyers, as jugglers, tightrope walkers, actors and singers kept the market packed. But the sights and sounds of hawkers trading their goods from door to door largely belonged to the past.<sup>28</sup>

Brothels were closed. In Beijing they were raided by 2,400 police officers on 21 November 1949. Over a thousand women and several hundred owners, procurers and pimps were arrested at a stroke. The re-education camps were already so crowded that the women were locked up in a cluster of decommissioned brothels on Hanjiatan, in the very heart of the city's erstwhile red-light district. They too were put to work and made to attend study sessions examining the evils of feudalism as well as vocational training classes. In order to make a clean break with the past, they were taken to large assembly halls where they had to denounce their former employers, who were often standing on the platform wearing shackles.<sup>29</sup>

Similar scenarios were enacted elsewhere. Between October 1949 and January 1950, Suzhou, Bengbu, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Tianjin, among other cities, stamped out prostitution. In Shanghai a more gradual approach was adopted: the brothels were slowly starved of customers by increasingly stringent regulations. First banquets, gambling, soliciting and rowdy behaviour were prohibited, then all past contracts between the women and the owners were declared void. The police applied relentless pressure, using an inventory compiled by the previous regime listing the address and registration number of each known brothel. Every time one of the 930 or so establishments closed, the address was struck from the list. Several brothel keepers were executed as a warning to others. News of their execution was printed in bold with black borders. Many owners voluntarily handed over the premises, often for lack of customers. Some returned to their home villages, others became tailors, cigarette sellers or even freight hauliers.

Many of the women were sent to a re-education camp. Here, as elsewhere in the country, they were made to follow a strict penal schedule, spending much of their time in study sessions denouncing the mistreatment they had suffered under the old regime. But few conformed to the image of the contrite prostitute projected by propaganda. A fair number were restive and quarrelsome, while a few insulted or physically assaulted the cadres in charge of their re-education. They denounced the manual labour they were forced to perform as a new form of exploitation, apparently unhappy to

spend their days locked away, sewing olive-green shirts for the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. Cao Manzhi, one of the cadres in charge of the whole operation, later admitted that even those inmates who came from low-class brothels did not like being interned and missed their life as prostitutes. But most settled down once they realised that resistance was futile. The majority were sent back to inland areas. Brothels that had managed to survive were finally raided on 25 November 1951. Even at that stage some of the women attacked the cadres in charge of the arrests.<sup>30</sup>

Prostitution was soon proclaimed to be an evil of the past. But in Beijing alone 350 women, some of them only recently released from re-education camps, were soon plying their trade again. Only a handful did so because they could not make a living otherwise. Some pretended to be students or housewives, accompanied by small children and mothers-in-law for cover. A few even wore party uniforms and carried badges. They stood in the doorways openly soliciting customers: 'Come in for a cup of tea!' In other cities too, prostitution went underground. As hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees fled the countryside after liberation, women continued to sell sex in the cities. In Shanghai hundreds of them were arrested in 1952, the women becoming more adept at hiding their activities with every new sweep. In the following years the authorities would adopt much more draconian measures to stamp out vice.<sup>31</sup>

If disposing of vagrants and prostitutes was a challenge, handling the several million refugees, disbanded soldiers and unemployed in the cities represented an even bigger task. In batch after batch, they too were sent back to the countryside, which became the great dumping ground for all undesirable elements. But few wanted to leave the cities where they had rebuilt their lives, however precarious. In Shanghai only one in ten agreed to be repatriated to a village.<sup>32</sup>

In Nanjing an even smaller fraction co-operated. Some steadfastly refused to be resettled, and objected to the military approach used in the dispersal plan. But despite all their objections, a third of a million people – equivalent to a quarter of the population – were sent away from the old regime's capital. The majority were dispatched to Shandong, Anhui and northern Jiangsu, but some ended up working on reclamation projects. More than 14,000 undesirables, mainly beggars, were destined for 'production training camps'.<sup>33</sup>

According to the party line, people were supposed to have a home village, but in reality many had been away for decades and had no relatives or friends left. The idea was that they could till the land, but all too often they

were discriminated against as outsiders and given tiny plots of unfertile land that no local farmers wanted. A few missed out on land reform altogether and became local outcasts. Many clandestinely tried to make their way back to the cities.

Hundreds of thousands of demobilised soldiers, petty thieves, beggars, vagrants and prostitutes were also sent to help develop and occupy the resource-rich, politically strategic north-west, a region bordering India, Mongolia and the Soviet Union. From Beijing alone, by the end of 1949, close to 16,000 people were sent to Xinjiang and Gansu. Many objected. One beggar refused to join a work team, arguing that ‘Beijing is my hometown. How can I go to the north-west and reclaim wasteland?’ In one case a group of disbanded soldiers rebelled before being sent out to the frontier regions. They took control of the re-education camp where they had been confined and ran away in groups. So summary were the decisions made about relocation that in one case eighty-seven individuals, all classified as elderly or invalided, were sent to Ningxia to reclaim wasteland.<sup>34</sup>

Many of those who arrived in the north-west were forced to live in holes in the ground and made to do hard labour all day long, levelling sand dunes, planting trees and digging irrigation ditches. One woman remembered how she was lured to the region with tales of hot water and electricity in every house. After she and other migrants arrived they were told: ‘Comrades, you must prepare to bury your bones in Xinjiang.’<sup>35</sup>

On paper the plan was straightforward: empty the cities of undesirables, reform all parasites and create employment. But it was a huge task, made no easier by a deep ideological suspicion of cities overall (‘Shanghai is a non-productive city. It is a parasitic city,’ complained one newspaper in 1949).<sup>36</sup> The problem was that for every batch of people the authorities shipped away, another group covertly managed to find their way back to the city. In October 1950, up to 2 million refugees were on the road after floods caused havoc in Anhui province. In Nanjing alone 340 people arrived every day from the countryside. Whether young or old, many had to beg and steal to survive. In Shanghai the refugees slept, cooked and relieved themselves on the streets as every available camp, prison or reformatory built by the authorities since 1949 was already overcrowded.<sup>37</sup>

The situation was compounded by steady increases in unemployment in the first couple of years of the takeover, notwithstanding extravagant promises made to workers during the heady days of liberation, when they were her-

alded as ‘masters of the country’ ready to ‘take charge’.<sup>38</sup> Entrepreneurs and industrialists, on the other hand, were also deceived by the new regime’s rhetoric of inclusion in the name of New Democracy, a slogan that promised co-operation with all except the most hardened enemies of the regime. As part of this window-dressing, a small number of non-communist parties like the Democratic League were co-opted and allowed to take part in a Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body that met at the same time as the National People’s Congress.

It all started well enough. Years of destruction, inflation and corruption had severely disrupted the economy. Communication networks were badly damaged, and the railway tracks were in disarray. Areas where local power stations had been bombed or coal stocks were low lacked electricity. So the most immediate task in the cities was salvage rather than construction. In Beijing, Tianjin, Wuhan and Shanghai, the barricades erected by the fleeing nationalists were removed from the streets. Shell-damaged sites were cleared, burned-out houses pulled down, concrete fortifications and pill-boxes levelled. Building debris was used to fill bomb craters. In Changchun and other besieged cities tens of thousands of bodies were thrown into collective pits. The streets were disinfected. Everywhere telephone lines went up – sometimes a military network running side by side with the restored civil installations. Sunken ships that blocked rivers and harbours were removed. Where generators had been damaged, technicians were helped by the army to repair the machines and mend cables. Railway lines were double-tracked and bridges repaired.<sup>39</sup>

Inflation, though never fully curbed, was at least brought under control. The People’s Republic issued its own People’s Dollar, called the *renminbi*, and made it the only medium of exchange. Trade in its rivals – greenbacks, silver dollars and gold – was tolerated for a few months, but then the money-changers were forced to close their doors. In Shanghai a massive rally of half a million people denounced gold dealers and other traders as so many speculators. Thousands of students were mobilised to harangue the population against hoarding silver dollars. They kept watch on the bazaars and policed the pavements where foreign coins used to change hands.<sup>40</sup>

Soon the hand of the state started to curb other economic activities. Giant state trading corporations controlled raw materials, severely circumscribing the scope of private enterprise. Organised on a regional basis, these corporations entered into barter agreements to transfer goods from surplus areas to places of scarcity. In one example, the North China Trading Company exchanged cloth, yarn, kerosene, gasoline, caustic soda and glass for cotton,



peanut oil and tobacco from the Central China Trading Company. Many of them also ran state shops and co-operatives, designed to check speculative price increases in a whole range of commodities, from foodstuffs, cloth, farming tools, household equipment, hardware, soap, matches and sugar to stationery.<sup>41</sup>

In many ways the regime merely extended to the rest of the country the way it ran its economy in the regions it controlled before liberation, but this trend was further accelerated by the very effective blockade of the ports imposed by Chiang Kai-shek. Cities such as Tianjin, Shanghai and Guangzhou depended on maritime trade. They could no longer obtain the coal, cotton, steel or oil for their factories or the spare parts for their machines. And as they could not buy from abroad, neither could they sell abroad. All of Shanghai's trade had to be switched from foreign markets to the interior of the country.<sup>42</sup>

But even without the blockade the economy would have been paralysed. The regime had made no secret of its hostility to foreign governments, with the exception of the Soviet Union and its satellites. Foreign trade was now in the hands of government agencies, and the rate of the *renminbi* was artificially high, meaning that exports were not very attractive on the international market. Even with open ports, the complex and sophisticated industries along the coast were starved of capital. Shanghai's industry, which represented more than half of the country's production, was operating only partially. As one foreign observer noted, 'Cotton spinning mills are working three days a week and have only six months' stock in hand in spite of a big effort to replace American by Chinese cotton transported in junks from the interior. Manchurian industry, which in 1945 was the victim of Russian requisitions, is producing, according to the most reliable sources, 30 per cent of its output under the Japanese.' But the communists were firmly set against all recourse to foreign capital, symbol of imperialist exploitation, and without adequate capital everything soon ground to a halt. They were forced to seek a massive loan from the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup>

Instead of receiving the material incentives promised by the party, workers were exhorted to produce more. But the workers, ironically, were the most restive group among the population. Hoping to stand at the forefront of the revolution, they demanded increased wages and better working conditions. They became so vocal that the communists introduced a new labour decree making strikes illegal. Their employers, on the other hand, protested that under the slogan of New Democracy they had been promised protection and assured that they could continue to run their enterprises on a private

basis. But soon they were compelled to accept wage increases that vastly inflated the costs of labour on their balance sheets.<sup>44</sup>

Heavy, variable and unpredictable taxes on everyone followed, as the regime was desperate for cash. In Beijing, where they were calculated in terms of millet, 31,400 tonnes were raised in 1946, down to 21,000 tons in 1947 and only 10,000 tonnes the following year. Within the first year of liberation the people of Beijing were asked to hand over the equivalent of 53,000 tonnes of millet. Everybody complained, from small shopkeepers driven out of business to ordinary workers unable to feed their families. In Changsha, the once thriving capital of Mao's home province of Hunan, the average tax imposed on all 420,000 residents was 250 kilos of grain per person a year, far above the limit of 80 kilos the regime had mandated for a city of that size. In the case of private enterprise, some of the taxes were retroactive, with little reference to their income during those years. Soon the finance minister Bo Yibo himself admitted that punitive taxes, chaotically and randomly collected by cadres, had damaged commerce. A 120 per cent tax had ruined the tobacco industry.<sup>45</sup>

The cadres themselves were part of the problem. They were attuned to the rigours of guerrilla warfare rather than to the intricacies of international banking and finance that were the daily routine in Shanghai, the greatest commercial centre in Asia. The metropolis was half as big again as Moscow, with a larger foreign population than any other city except New York. Before liberation it had more foreign investment than London or Paris. At first the cadres allowed the city to continue to operate independently as far as possible, but soon the very distance they cultivated from the people became a problem. They checked every bit of advice they were given for fear of error, and in any event lacked the required financial expertise to evaluate the matters brought to their attention.

They were reticent, reserved, remote. They were unreasonably cautious and suspicious and would not mix with the people. They were not gregarious, neither were they open and communicative. They were coldly correct in their official dealings, but did not want to be enlightened on the problems they were confronted with, even refusing to discuss the problems . . . They would brook no interference and encourage no suggestion. A word of counsel was considered meddling, an offer of help, officiousness. Everybody was under a stigma of doubt, even of guilt.

As Mariano Ezpeleta noted, they insisted on calling everybody 'comrade', but there was nothing comradely about their behaviour.<sup>46</sup>

Distance was maintained not only with foreigners and business leaders, seen as spies in an imperialist lair, but also with other sectors of the popula-

tion. By the middle of 1949 some 38,000 cadres from the north had entered the region immediately south of the Yangzi River. Many never became accustomed to the food, the climate and the local language. Only a few managed to settle down. In Hangzhou, Ningbo and Wenzhou, the commercial centres of Zhejiang, cadres vented their hatred in consultation meetings with representatives of trade and industry that degenerated into 'struggle sessions' where people were mocked, humiliated and beaten. Soon nobody dared say a word. Shaoxing, a beautiful city of gardens and canals famed for its rice wine, was run as if the party was still fighting a guerrilla war.<sup>47</sup>

Within a matter of months, bustling Shanghai was a dying city. Tianjin slipped into slow decay. Guangzhou almost went bankrupt. Factories were idle, trade ceased. Many firms, small and big alike, were driven into the red. The high end of the luxury market suffered first. In the once thriving jewellery stores on Nanking Road in Shanghai, where gold ornaments competed for attention with finely wrought jade pieces, merchants started selling soap, DDT, medicines, towels and underwear. Where 136 factories had once made cosmetics, only thirty remained in operation, most of them producing toothpaste. In Shanghai's outdoor bazaar at Yuyuan Garden, where curios, crafts and antiques were sold, dispirited merchants sat beside their stalls looking bored or perusing the papers.<sup>48</sup>

Other branches of industry followed. Hundreds of factories making paper, matches, rubber and cotton textiles closed down. Contemporary observers in Hong Kong estimated that about 4,000 concerns in Shanghai, including 2,000 commercial companies and 1,000 factories, went bankrupt. Of some 500 banks in the city, fewer than a hundred were still open, and half of these petitioned the government for permission to wind up their operations. Many of the city's foreign-owned transit and power companies were forced to finance operational deficits by borrowing heavily from the People's Bank, placing them virtually in the hands of the government.

Shopping centres in most big cities now seemed lifeless and deserted. Observed one trader in Shanghai: 'Between the Bund and the Park Hotel the windows of all stores – including the big proud ones like Wing On, Sincere, Sun Sun and the Sun – are plastered with posters which shout: "We Reduce Prices with Pain!", "Shop Closing Down", "Prices Falling Below Cost".' In Wuhan, the inland port once called the Chicago of the East, more than 500 shops went bust, while hundreds of factories closed their doors. In Wuxi, the industrial city north of Shanghai where steam whistles, electric sirens and hooters had once competed for attention, silence prevailed, as hundreds of shops were boarded up. In Songjiang only one of the eighteen

cotton mills that had made the reputation of the town managed to remain in business.<sup>49</sup>

Unemployment rocketed. By December 1949 Beijing had 54,000 unemployed people in a population of 2 million. Four years later the population had increased by half, but the number of jobless people had trebled – despite all the successive waves of vagrants, paupers, soldiers, refugees, pedlars and other ‘undesirable elements’ cleansed from the streets since liberation. Unemployment also increased in Shanghai. In the summer of 1950, a report compiled by the party itself deplored ‘incessant’ cases of suicide and the sale of children due to joblessness among 150,000 people.<sup>50</sup>

In south China too, many of the unemployed sold their children or killed themselves. Some starved to death. In Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province just opposite Taiwan, more than 100,000 people were out of work in a city of less than half a million. According to a restricted news bulletin for the leadership, the only help came from the nationalists, who flew over the distressed regions and parachuted down bags of rice. So great was the popular discontent that in Changsha, on six occasions, unemployed workers surrounded the Workers’ Union and demonstrated against the communist party. Calls for blood could be heard from the crowd. Similar protests also rocked Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong, where by the summer of 1950 one in three workers was jobless. In Zhengzhou, one of China’s railway hubs, hundreds of porters assaulted the municipal freight office, beat the men in charge and smashed doors, windows and furniture to protest against the low rates they were paid. In Nanjing, where industrial workers had to make do with fewer benefits and less pay than before liberation, complaints were ‘ceaseless’ and ‘reactionary’ slogans were scribbled on walls along offices and factories ‘everywhere’. In Shanghai, as mayor Chen Yi reported directly to the Chairman, disenchantment was so intense that members left the party in droves while ordinary people petitioned the government and tore down posters of Mao Zedong.<sup>51</sup>

People were told to practise thrift and frugality. Production was extolled, consumption denounced. Ideological purity went hand in hand with economic decline to transform once bustling metropolises into drab zones of conformity. Within months of the revolution, the pursuit of pleasure was frowned upon as a sign of bourgeois frivolity. In Shanghai, as elsewhere, cafés and dance halls were closed down. Clandestine gambling casinos broke up without police intervention. The hotels that had once sealed the city’s world-class reputation such as the Cathay (renamed the Peace Hotel), the Palace Hotel and the Park Hotel, had so few guests that some of them

offered monthly rates of \$25 to \$50. The Shanghai Club, reputedly boasting the longest bar in the world, attracted few customers. Even tea rooms closed their doors. The Race Course at Nanking Road became a military barracks. Nightlife was negligible, as shops were shuttered at six in the evening and clubs a few hours later. Those who ventured out at night were accosted by young communists demanding to see residence certificates and other papers. Fewer rickshaws, buses and pedicabs were seen on the streets. Cars were mostly official, as the cost of petrol became prohibitive. Thousands of vehicles vanished from the streets every month. An unused Buick, less than a year old, was on sale for \$500 in June 1950 but found no buyers.<sup>52</sup>

English was no longer the language of international business but a manifestation of imperialist exploitation. No transactions in English were tolerated, and soon foreigners on official business – all channelled through a Foreign Affairs Office – were required to bring along their own translators. ‘The talks were formal, carefully uninformative, and recorded by a stenographer,’ reported Randall Gould, who worked for the *Shanghai Evening Post and Mercury*. Then the transmission of cables and telegrams in foreign languages was prohibited, except when accompanied by a translation judged to be satisfactory. ‘Neon lights and other public advertisements in English were brought down or changed into Chinese. English and French plaques in public parks and gardens were taken down.’ The pressure extended to cinemas and eating places, where foreign names became taboo. In the erstwhile French Concession of Shanghai, streets and boulevards were renamed for the most part after local cities and provinces rather than priests, dignitaries, consuls and writers from France. Everywhere the hammer and sickle or the red star went up: they could be seen on trams, buildings, banners and flags, and invariably adorned the badges worn by state employees. Paintings of Chinese and Soviet leaders were hung prominently in public places, in bookshops, in railway stations, in factories, schools and offices, on the gateway to the Forbidden City. And from the very beginning the communists guarded themselves more closely than their predecessors, as sentries kept strict watch at every communist office, even in places where the old regime had none.<sup>53</sup>

The press was brought into line almost immediately. In Beijing, besides the official paper, by February 1949 only one single-sheet newspaper out of twenty-odd daily publications was still in business. In Shanghai two of the four English-language newspapers, both under Chinese ownership, were closed within days. Of the hundreds of different publications several months later only a few remained, all of them printing the same news.

There was only one source of foreign information, namely the Soviet TASS Agency. Here too, rather than imposing censorship from above, the authorities relied on self-censorship – which was surprisingly effective once journalists and editors had gone through re-education. As one journalist noted, a party hack nudged them in the right direction: ‘The slightest mistake calls down a rebuke, and in each editorial office a few trusty Communists inspect all copy.’ The result was absolute conformity. As one student of propaganda noted at the time, ‘The Communists’ newspaper propaganda technique might be described as the “sledge-hammer type”. There is very little subtlety involved. Good and bad, friend and foe, are defined in terms of black and white. Everything is reduced to simple slogans or formulae, and all channels (the radio as well as the press) concentrate simultaneously on pounding them in.’<sup>54</sup>

The way people dressed changed seemingly overnight. Jewellery was seen as bourgeois, as was anything ostentatious. Lipstick and make-up vanished. Young girls cut their curls. Men and women removed their rings. Expensive straps on watches were replaced by a piece of leather or string. ‘The fashion was simplicity almost to the point of rags,’ noted one woman who had just joined the party. Li Zhisui, arriving from Australia after an absence of seventeen years, was struck by how dreary men and women looked, as most of Beijing was clad in a standard blue or grey cotton that faded almost completely after frequent washing. The same black cotton-cloth shoes were common, and even hairstyles were identical – crewcuts for men and short bobs for women. ‘With my Western-style suit and tie, leather shoes, and hair that suddenly seemed long, I felt like a foreigner.’ His wife, in her colourful dress and high-heeled shoes, her stylish hair freshly permed, looked completely out of place. Both quickly borrowed more subdued clothes. But they were thrilled nonetheless by the changes taking place. ‘When I saw glimmerings that the party was not all I believed it to be, I dismissed them as trivial exceptions to the rule.’<sup>55</sup>

## The Hurricane

For years Mao Zedong groped to find his way as a young man, first as a scholar, then as a publisher, finally as a labour activist. In the countryside, five years after joining the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, he finally discovered his calling. Still a young man of thirty-three, tall, lean and handsome, he was enthralled by the peasant violence that had erupted in the countryside after the nationalists had launched a military campaign from their base in Guangzhou to seize power from local warlords and unify the country. Russian advisers accompanied the nationalist army, as Chiang Kai-shek, at this stage, was still collaborating closely with Stalin. In Mao's home province of Hunan, the nationalist authorities followed Russian instructions in funding peasant associations and fomenting a Soviet-style revolution. Social order broke down. In Changsha, the provincial capital, victims were paraded in tall conical hats of mockery. Children scampered down the streets singing, 'Down with the [imperialist] powers and eliminate the warlords.' Workers armed with bamboo sticks picketed the offices of foreign companies. Public utilities were wrecked.<sup>1</sup>

In the countryside, the poorest of the villagers took control of the peasant associations and turned the world upside down. They were now the masters, choosing their targets at random, striking down the wealthy and powerful, creating a reign of terror. Some victims were knifed, a few decapitated. Chinese pastors were paraded through the streets as 'running dogs of imperialism', their hands bound behind their backs and a rope around their necks. Churches were looted. Mao admired the audacity and violence of the rebels. He was attracted by the slogans they coined: 'Anyone who has land is a tyrant, and all gentry are bad.' He went to the countryside to investigate the uprisings. 'They strike the gentry to the ground,' Mao wrote in his report on the peasant movement. 'People swarm into the houses of local tyrants and evil gentry who are against the peasant association, slaughter their pigs and consume their grain. They even loll for a minute or two on the ivory-inlaid beds belonging to the young ladies in the households of the local tyrants and evil gentry. At the slightest provocation they make arrests, crown the arrested with tall paper hats, and parade them



through the villages.’ Mao was so taken with the violence that he felt ‘thrilled as never before’.<sup>2</sup>

Mao predicted that a hurricane would destroy the existing order:

In a very short time, in China’s central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves.<sup>3</sup>

The violence in the countryside repelled the nationalists, as many of their officers came from prosperous families, and soon they turned away from the Soviet model. A year later, after his troops had entered Shanghai in April 1927, Chiang Kai-shek launched a bloody purge in which 300 communists were dragged through the streets and executed. Many thousands were arrested. The Chinese Communist Party went underground. Mao led a motley army of 1,300 men into the mountains, in search of the peasants who would propel him to power.

Twenty years later, in a homage to the Chairman who now controlled vast tracts of the countryside, Zhou Libo published a novel on land reform, *The Hurricane*. The author, an editor of the literary supplement of the *Liberation Daily* in Yan’an, had been transferred in 1946 to Manchuria to join a work team tasked with galvanising the countryside. The team was one of the first to follow a directive Mao had issued in May 1946, as the peace talks between the nationalists and the communists started to unravel. So far the communists had followed a moderate policy of rent reduction, as they were bound in a popular front with the nationalists in a common war against Japan. Now the May directive called for all-out class struggle in the countryside. All the land, Mao ordered, should be confiscated from traitors, tyrants, bandits and landlords and distributed to the poor peasants. The revolutionary potential of the countryside was to be unleashed, sweeping away the old order and repelling the nationalists.

Zhou Libo’s team was sent to Yuanbao, a town near the banks of the Sungari River some 130 kilometres east of Harbin. *The Hurricane* purported to describe what happened next. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the peasants of Yuanbao seized power from the local tyrants and abolished thousands of years of feudal land ownership. In public trials where depraved landlords were made to confess their sins, the irate masses raised sticks and beat the villains to death. Soon their revolutionary zeal

took them to other villages, sweeping away all remnants of feudalism like a hurricane. The novel, an instant hit, was used as a textbook for other work teams in charge of land reform, and won the much coveted Stalin Prize for Literature in 1951.<sup>4</sup>

But in reality something very different happened in Yuanbao. After the defeat of Japan at the end of the Second World War, most villagers in Manchuria were conservative and regarded the nationalists as their legitimate government. Few knew anything about communism. ‘When we went there, at the time the villagers didn’t know what we communists were like or what the Eighth Army was. They had no idea,’ remembered Han Hui, who was a twenty-two-year-old cadre at the time. In Yuanbao only a few ruffians and vagrants were interested in the communists, and they were the ones who became party activists.

One of the first tasks of the work team was to divide the villagers into five classes, closely mirroring what had been done in the Soviet Union: ‘landlords’, ‘rich peasants’, ‘middle peasants’, ‘poor peasants’ and ‘labourers’.<sup>5</sup> This took place in endless meetings in the evening, as the work teams pored over the life stories of each and every villager with information gathered from newly recruited activists. The challenge was that none of these artificial class distinctions actually corresponded to the social landscape of the village, where most farmers often lived in roughly similar conditions. In Yuanbao there were no landlords. Han Laoliu, who would become the archetypical villain in Zhou Libo’s novel, had been elected head of the local peasant association by the villagers. His wife was a music teacher who sewed clothes in the evening for the schoolchildren. He had no land, but collected rent on behalf of the owner who lived in the county seat or administrative centre. Like the others, he ate coarse grain and had too few clothes to keep him warm in the winter. His greatest claim to wealth was two small windowpanes built into his earth-walled house covered with a layer of straw. ‘In reality Han Laoliu had nothing worthwhile,’ remembered one villager. ‘It’s not quite like what’s written in that book.’

The next task was to get those identified as ‘poor peasants’ and ‘labourers’ to turn hardship into hatred. This, too, took weeks of persistence and persuasion, as the work team had to convince the ‘poor’ that the ‘rich’ were behind their every misfortune, having exploited their labour since time immemorial. In so-called ‘speak bitterness’ meetings, participants were encouraged to tap into a reservoir of grievances. Some vented genuine frustrations that had long been bottled up; others were coerced into inventing accusations against their richer neighbours. Greed became a powerful tool in

whipping up class hatred, as members of the work team calculated the monetary equivalent of past misdeeds, urging the poorer villagers to demand compensation.

Weeks of indoctrination also produced true believers who no longer needed prodding along from the work team. Some people were transformed into revolutionary zealots, ready to break the bonds of family and friendship for the cause. Drawn to an ideology that promised liberation, they relished becoming the champions of the exploited, forging a better world full of hope and light. They no longer felt themselves mere farmers plodding along in a forlorn village, at the mercy of the seasons, but instead believed they were part of something new that endowed their lives with meaning. As one missionary caught up in land reform noted, ‘They knew their parts well and spoke sharply the proper party phrase at the proper time with the proper emphasis.’<sup>6</sup>

After months of patient work, the communists managed to turn the poor against the village leaders. A once closely knit community was polarised into two extremes. The communists armed the poor, sometimes with guns, more often with pikes, sticks and hoes. The victims were denounced as ‘landlords’, ‘tyrants’ and ‘traitors’, rounded up and held in cowsheds. Armed militia sealed off the village; nobody was allowed to leave. Everybody had to wear a strip of cloth identifying their class background. The landlords had a white strip, rich peasants a pink one while middle peasants wore yellow. The poor proudly displayed red.

One by one the class enemies were dragged out on to a stage where they were denounced by the crowd, assembled in their hundreds, screaming for blood, demanding that accounts be settled in an atmosphere charged with hatred. Victims were mercilessly denounced, mocked, humiliated, beaten and killed in these ‘struggle sessions’. Soon an orgy of violence engulfed the village, as people lived in fear of reprisals from private militias led by former village leaders who had managed to escape.

Many of the victims were beaten to death and some shot, but in many cases they were first tortured in order to make them reveal the location of their assets – real or imagined. There was no shortage of volunteers. Liu Fude remembered: ‘There were people who only needed to be told to hit somebody and they would do so. For instance Madame Ding, she was that kind of person.’ Madame Ding, who worked for Zhou Libo, claimed: ‘I did exactly as he told me to do. This is what Zhou Libo would say: “That Sun Liangba can be taken to task,” that’s what he would say. So I would beat him.’ One woman who had been beaten unconscious was about to be bur-

ied in a coffin outside the village, when somebody discovered that she was still breathing. A leader ordered that she be dragged out of her coffin and executed. Some of those labelled 'rich peasants' tried to hide in the fields, but they froze to death. In one village alone, out of a population of roughly 700, seventy-three people were killed.

The pact between the party and the poor was sealed in blood as all the land and assets of the victims were distributed to the crowd. The land was paced, measured and distributed to the poor, the name of the beneficiary carved on to a wooden signboard marking the boundary of each plot. Grain was loaded into baskets, furniture lugged off, pigs herded away. Even pots and jars were placed in rattan hampers, making it look like moving day. 'So what did I get?' Liu Yongqing pondered more than fifty years after the looting, his skin leathery and tanned, his hair sparse and grey. 'I got a jar. A water jar.' Lü Kesheng, a man with an open face topped by a dense crop of white hair, got less: 'I got a horse. A horse leg, not a whole horse. We [slaughtered and] divided a horse between four families.' Zhang Xiangling, a young cadre at the time, also got a horse leg. 'My grandfather, grandmother, my great-grandfather, several generations never had a horse's leg. Now we had one! That was just incredible!' Even rags were shared out between the villagers – always according to class divisions, the first choice going to the 'poor peasants' and the 'labourers'.

Once everything in the village had been mopped up, down to the last handful of grain, the poor got into their carts in the middle of the night and visited other villages, hoping that they might find new struggle targets. 'You get what you find' was the motto. Soon hundreds of carts converged on the county seat, each one crammed with farmers armed with banners, pitchforks and red-tasselled spears. 'The rats in the city are even fatter than the pigs in the village.' City people had money. In the county as a whole, 21,000 out of a population of 118,000 were targeted. To ensure that the supporters of the old regime would never come back, many young men joined the army. Their families received extra land and special protection. Soon the soldiers started to besiege Changchun.<sup>2</sup>

China had a hidden asset, one it jealously protected from the prying eyes of strangers in small, family-based villages all across the country. It was the land. Nobody knew exactly how much of it there was, and every government had failed fully to measure, assess and tax it. More often than not the land tax was based on a rough approximation carried out decades if not centuries earlier. Outsiders were often eyed with suspicion, and all the vil-

layers had an incentive to keep some land hidden from the view of the state. No tax, for instance, was generally paid on uncultivated land, such as grave plots, sandy soil, wooded areas or land high up in the hills. As the population expanded and new crops appeared that were suited to soils previously left unploughed (for example the potato and the peanut after the eighteenth century), more and more untaxed land was cultivated without the knowledge of the tax assessors. On top of this, large plots were left unregistered: nobody quite knew the extent of what was called 'black land', and a nationwide survey with vast inputs of manpower would have been needed to uncover it.<sup>8</sup>

Land reform pitted villagers against each other, and as they denounced one another in ferocious meetings, the actual holdings in the countryside finally came to light. Properties of the rich were expropriated and their land parcelled out to the poor. Ground rent was abolished. But now the party knew exactly how much land existed. It determined how much each strip could produce and demanded that each household hand over a designated amount of grain. As one observer noted about Manchuria: 'Heavy grain requisitions to support the Communists' armies of 3 to 4 million men have in many areas not only stripped the countryside of food surpluses but have eaten into subsistence stocks.' On top of tax, foodstuffs including soybeans, corn, rice and vegetable oils were traded with the Soviet Union for industrial equipment, motor vehicles, oil and manufactured supplies, increasing the overall food deficit. Hundreds of thousands of people starved to death in Manchuria as a result.<sup>2</sup>

Village life, on the eve of the communist conquest, was extraordinarily diverse. In the north, where tightly packed villages with houses made from sun-dried mud bricks were strewn across the dry and dusty plains, wheat was the staple. Most farmers owned the land. Further inland along the ancient silk road, set among bare hills and steep ravines on a loess plateau, tens of millions of people lived in caves hewn out of brittle earth. These people of the dust carved out tiny terraces on steep slopes of eroding loess, planting the soil with potatoes, maize and millet. Further south, along the fertile Yangzi valley, rich deposits of silt allowed farmers to produce abundant crops of rice. White plastered houses with black-tiled roofs in closely knit clusters stood among the rice paddies with their raised banks, dykes and embankments.

Even more varied were the communities in the south, from coastal fishing hamlets to aboriginal villages deep in the mountains. Scattered along

the coast were whole villages with ostentatious mansions built by returned emigrants. They were directly inspired by foreign architecture, except for the windows, which tended to be narrow and placed high up near the roof as a concession to local geomancy – and as a precaution against theft. The individual character of these houses and their owners stood in contrast to the fortified cities erected by the Hakka, who spoke their own language and built enormous, tower-like, circular edifices which harboured hundreds of halls, storehouses and bedrooms accommodating dozens of families. The villagers often shared the same surname and lived together for support and protection. All over the subtropical south, powerful lineages controlled the land and built extensive villages with ancestral halls, schools, granaries and community temples. The most basic social distinction – as in any other village in the world – was between locals and outsiders.

Nowhere in this profusion of social diversity could anybody called a ‘landlord’ (*dizhu*) be found. The term was imported from Japan in the late nineteenth century and given its modern formulation by Mao Zedong. It had no meaning for most people in the countryside, who referred to some of their more fortunate neighbours as *caizhu*, an appellation that implied prosperity yet carried no derogatory undertones. There were also plenty of less respectful labels such as ‘big belly’ (*daduzi*). As S. T. Tung, publisher of the *Chinese Farmer* with a doctoral degree in agriculture from Cornell University, put it at the time, ‘China has no “landlord class”.’ There is little question that absent landowners abused their power, while malpractices were rife in the countryside, but the country did not have a dominant class of junkers or squires, and nothing equivalent to serfdom.<sup>10</sup>

Nor was there anything even vaguely approximating what the communists referred to as ‘feudalism’ (*fengjian*) in the countryside. For centuries the land had been bought and sold through sophisticated contracts that were upheld in magistrates’ courts. In some cases contracts even drew a distinction between the topsoil and the subsoil. The land was freely alienable everywhere. Tenancy rights were also defined contractually, although the vast bulk of the land was in the hands of small owners. Trusts were set up by corporate entities to hold land, for instance temples, schools and, especially in the south, clans sharing a surname and organised around a common ancestor.

The most systematic, reliable and extensive sample survey of farmers was carried out from 1929 to 1933 by a University of Nanking team led by John L. Buck. They surveyed in detail the entire population of 168 villages distributed over twenty-two provinces, collecting immense amounts

of detailed information on the lives of over 16,000 farms. *Land Utilization in China* scrupulously noted the many regional differences and varied forms of employment in the countryside, but the overall image which emerged from the study denied the existence of vast inequalities. Over half of all farmers were owners, many were part-owners, and fewer than 6 per cent were tenants. Most farms were relatively small, and very few were more than twice the average size. Tenants were not generally much poorer than owners, since only fertile land could be rented out. In the south, for instance, tenants on irrigated rice land were better off than owners in the north, even more so since two grain crops could often be grown a year. A majority of farmers supplemented their incomes with handicrafts and other forms of non-agricultural employment which produced roughly a sixth of their incomes. One-third of all farmers surveyed were unaware of any adverse factors in agriculture. None blamed expensive credit, exploitative merchants or land tenure.<sup>11</sup>

But this was before the war. A decade of fighting between nationalists, communists and the Japanese did not substantially change the ownership of the land, but certainly increased violence in the countryside. In Xushui, some hundred kilometres south of Beijing in the dry and dusty countryside of north China, where the fields were covered in sorghum, growing two metres high with purple tassels of grain, the Japanese and the communists were as fierce as each other. Sun Nainai, healthy and talkative when she was interviewed at the age of eighty-nine, explained how the villagers were caught between both camps. The Japanese captured her father-in-law as a guerrilla fighter and gave him a choice: work for the police in his village or be buried alive. He took the second option because he knew that if he agreed to work for the Japanese, the communists would bury his entire family alive in retribution. In the end his family secured his release by paying an enormous ransom. In normal times village life would have been rife with family feuds and personal wrongs, but farmers in war-torn areas were obliged to make even harder choices between resistance, collaboration and survival.<sup>12</sup>

Many people were accused of being traitors. Jack Belden, a journalist sympathetic to the communists, described how a local leader called Mu had collaborated with the Japanese and killed dozens of guerrilla fighters. Just after the war Mu was paraded through the villages where people stood waiting with kitchen knives to cut out his flesh. He was dragged on to a stage to face his accusers, and found everyone in the crowd trying to rush forward at once.



The cadres did not like the look of things and took Mu out in a field and shot him. They handed his body to his family who covered it with straw sheets. The crowd found out where he was and grabbed the body away from his family, they ripped off the straw sheets and continued to beat him with wooden clubs. One boy with a spear stabbed his corpse eighteen times in succession. 'You stabbed my father eighteen times,' he cried, 'and I will do the same.' In the end, they tore his head from his body.<sup>13</sup>

Land reform cut a bloody swathe through the villages under communist control. Everywhere work teams dug up old grudges, fanned resentment and turned local grievances into class hatred, and everywhere mobs were worked into a frenzy of envy as they appropriated the possessions of traditional village leaders. Yuanbao was one of the first towns where land was traded for blood, but in 1947–8 every village went through a similar ritual: people were divided into classes, the poor worked up into a fever pitch of hatred, victims humiliated, beaten and sometimes killed, and the victors shared the spoils.

One of the most violent regions was Shanxi, where Kang Sheng presided over a reign of terror. A sinister-looking man with a murky past, Kang had worked closely with the Soviet secret police in eliminating hundreds of Chinese in Moscow during the great purges started by Stalin in 1934. Students disappeared at night, never to be seen again. In 1936 he set up the Office for the Elimination of Counter-Revolutionaries, and a year later Stalin sent him by special plane to Yan'an. He quickly sided with Mao, and used the police methods he had learned in the Soviet Union to oversee security and intelligence. So brutal were his methods that in 1945 he was replaced.<sup>14</sup>

Sent to Shanxi to oversee land reform in 1947, he fomented all-out class warfare in the countryside by forcing every villager to take a stand. In a hamlet called Haojiapo, he watched approvingly as the farmers forced landlords to kneel on broken bricks. The victims were then beaten, spat upon and had excrement poured over them. Kang Sheng allowed 'the masses' to decide who they did not like, unleashing pent-up frustrations that could target almost anyone. In parts of the region, the search for enemies went so far as to include even farmers classified as 'middle peasants', who were arrested, beaten, tortured and then stripped of their property. In some places one out of five people was branded as a 'landlord'. In Shuo county, nobody dared utter a word when someone was denounced as 'rich', because speaking out might lead to a potentially fatal accusation of 'shielding landlords'. It was enough for one of the poor to point at a farmer and call him a 'landlord' for his fate to be sealed. In Xing county alone, over 2,000 people

were killed, including 250 elderly and twenty-five children – the latter were called ‘little landlords’.

One of the victims was a man called Niu Youlan. His surname meant ‘ox’, and he had helped the guerrilla fighters with large gifts of grain, cloth and silver. His collaboration did not save him. In September 1947 the sixty-one-year-old man was dragged on to a stage to face 5,000 villagers. An iron wire was driven through his nostrils. Then his son was forced to pull him like an ox, blood streaming down his face. He was branded with a hot iron and died eight days later, locked up in a cave. As Xi Zhongxun reported to Mao Zedong on 19 January 1948, ‘people are drowned in vats of salt water. Some have boiling oil poured over their heads and burn to death.’<sup>15</sup>

Kang Sheng also directed land reform in other parts of the country. Soon his methods were copied everywhere. In Hebei, Liu Shaoqi reported that ‘when the masses fight, they beat, torture and kill people, and right now it is out of control’. People were buried alive, dismembered, shot, throttled to death. Sometimes the bodies of the victims were hung from trees and chopped up.<sup>16</sup> Zhang Mingyuan, in charge of land reform in eastern Hebei, witnessed how in one village forty-eight people were beaten to death in less than thirty minutes. But in many cases the violence was carefully orchestrated, as the poor tallied their votes to decide who should die in village assemblies. When names were called out people voted by raising their hands or by casting a soybean.<sup>17</sup>

One reason why the violence spread was that villagers literally got away with murder. After each struggle session the crowd divided up the material possessions of the victims. Greed and lust for power pushed party activists to define the individuals to be targeted in increasingly vague ways. But fear of retribution also fuelled violence. Deng Xiaoping described his experience of land reform in Anhui:

In one place in western Anhui the masses hated several landlords and demanded that they be killed, so we followed their wishes and killed them. After they had been killed, the masses feared reprisals from the relatives of the victims, so they drew up an even longer list of names, saying that if they could also be killed everything would be fine. So again we followed their wishes and killed those people. After they had been killed, the masses thought that even more people would seek revenge, so again they came up with a list of names. And again we killed according to their wishes. We kept on killing, and the masses kept on feeling more and more insecure, taking fright and fleeing. In the end we killed two hundred people, and all the work we did in twelve villages was ruined.<sup>18</sup>

By the beginning of 1948, when the pressure abated, some 160 million people were under communist control. On paper the party determined that

at least 10 per cent of the population were ‘landlords’ or ‘rich peasants’, but on the ground as many as 20 and sometimes even 30 per cent of the villagers were persecuted. The statistical evidence is woefully inadequate, but by a rough approximation between 500,000 and a million people were killed or driven to suicide.

In March 1951 a letter was published in the *People's Daily*. Several farmers from Hunan had written to ask about land reform. ‘Why doesn’t Chairman Mao just print some banknotes, buy the land from the landlords and then give us our share?’<sup>19</sup>

It was a good question. That was, after all, what was happening in the island fortress of arch-villain Chiang Kai-shek. Between 1949 and 1953, large landowners in Taiwan were compensated with commodity certificates and stocks in state-owned industries for the land that was redistributed among small farmers. This approach impoverished some wealthy villagers, but others used their compensation to start commercial and industrial enterprises. Not a drop of blood was shed. The experience was based on Korea and Japan, where land reform was successfully carried out under General Douglas MacArthur between 1945 and 1950. Not a drop of blood was shed there either.<sup>20</sup>

Land reform in the north of mainland China had been carried out in the midst of the civil war. But in the south, where the campaign unfolded from June 1950 to October 1952, it could have been peaceful, as the nationalists had fled to Taiwan. Even Stalin advised Mao to pursue a less destructive approach towards the countryside. Having presided over a ruthless war against the kulaks in the Soviet Union at the height of collectivisation in the 1930s, he was in a good position to offer a word of counsel. He had launched a pitiless campaign of dekulakisation in 1928, resulting in thousands of people being executed and close to 2 million being deported to labour colonies in Siberia or Soviet Central Asia. But now Stalin stressed the need to limit the struggle to landlords only and leave the economy of the rich peasants intact in order to speed up China’s recovery after years of warfare. His views were wired to Beijing in February 1950. A few months later the Land Reform Law was published, promising a less divisive policy.<sup>21</sup>

It was not to be. Promises on paper were a world apart from the violence on the ground. Mao wanted the traditional village leaders overthrown so that nothing would stand between the people and the party. As a Chinese saying has it, ‘The poor depend on the rich, the rich depend on Heaven.’ Now all were to become dependent on the party. And unlike the Soviet

Union, where the security organs had liquidated the kulaks, Mao wanted the farmers to do the job themselves. The moral values and social bonds of reciprocity that had long regulated village life were to be destroyed by pitting a majority against a minority. Only by implicating the people in murder could they become permanently linked to the party. Nobody was to stand on the sidelines. Everybody was to have blood on their hands through participation in mass rallies and denunciation meetings. Even before the law was published, Mao warned the assembled leaders on 6 June 1950 to prepare for a battle to the death: 'Land reform in a population of over 300 million people is a vicious war. It is more arduous, more complex, more troublesome than crossing the Yangzi, because our troops are 260 million peasant soldiers. This is a war for land reform, this is the most hideous class war between peasants and landlords. It is a battle to the death.'<sup>22</sup>

The need to break traditional village bonds was particularly acute in the south, where a series of popular rebellions directly challenged the communist party. There were many reasons why villagers objected to their new rulers, but the main one had to do with grain requisitions. These were carried out by the military, and often brutally. In parts of Guangdong 22 to 30 per cent of all the grain was requisitioned, sometimes as much as 60 per cent, forcing people to sell everything they had, from their cattle down to the seed necessary to plant the next crop. Throughout the south-west, the region under Deng Xiaoping's purview, ruthless house searches left their owners with just enough food to last for three days. In Sichuan, farmers were beaten, hung up and had smoke blown into their eyes or alcohol forced down their noses when they refused to hand over their crop. A bulletin reserved for the eyes of the top leadership noted that pregnant women were 'frequently' beaten so badly that they miscarried. Whole families swallowed poison in an attempt to find in death an escape from the tax inspectors. In a bizarre incident in Rongxian county, four women and a man were stripped naked and forced to run with kerosene lamps attached between their legs as an incentive to hand over more food. As a result, 2.9 million tonnes of grain were collected in tax from south-west China in 1950, although the state spent 4.3 million tonnes, most of it on an army of 1.7 million troops. Traditionally, the region had produced a grain surplus. Now it was bankrupt.<sup>23</sup>

People rebelled throughout the south. In Hunan, villagers took to the streets to demonstrate against the new regime. In a single incident in Nanxian county, a rice-growing region near Dongting Lake, more than 2,000 farmers clashed with soldiers. Shots were fired and thirteen people were

killed or injured. The following day a crowd of 10,000 irate farmers made their way to the county seat. Their demands: 'Stop the Procurements, Oppose the Transportation of Grain'. There were a dozen similar incidents in the province. A secret report described assaults against granaries in Hubei as 'ceaseless'. In Xiaogan a crowd of 2,000 people dragged away 7.5 tonnes of grain from a state warehouse. In Xishui, a county with a long revolutionary history, a crowd forcibly removed food from freight boats. In Enshi, a mass demonstration against procurements resulted in four dead. In Wuli, just outside Wuchang, the local people rebelled against the physical abuse they had to endure from the local cadres as well as 'random beatings and random killings' by members of the peasant association. By March 1950, dozens of 'relatively large rebellions of a mass character' – to use the wooden language of the party – had rocked Hubei. In Guizhou some of the incidents involved over 100,000 insurgents, ready to fight the communist party to the death.<sup>24</sup>

Unrest and rebellion also flared like tiny flash fires in parts of the north where land reform had not yet been carried out. In many parts of Shaanxi, where the dusty, dewless land was cracking from the summer drought, farmers armed with hoes started to hide their wheat for fear of state procurements.<sup>25</sup> Further inland along the ancient silk road, in Yongdeng county, Gansu, people banded together to resist state procurements. In one village, 200 farmers surrounded the grain collectors and beat them. In Minle county they were tied up.<sup>26</sup> In east China, some forty rebellions rocked the countryside in the first three months of 1950 alone. Most occurred in poor regions, and the target was always the same: famished villagers turned against the party and stormed the granaries. The rebels removed 3,000 tonnes of grain, leaving over 120 soldiers and cadres dead. As a report noted, local officials 'are completely unconcerned about the hardships of the masses, and even randomly beat, arrest and kill people in the course of their work, producing antagonisms with the masses'.<sup>27</sup>

The party blamed 'landlords' – as well as spies and saboteurs – for standing behind the rebellions. By expropriating large numbers of them and redistributing their assets, the communists hoped to persuade the villagers to rally behind them.<sup>28</sup>

But as the second round of land reform unfolded, a new problem appeared: the further south the communists went, the less land there was. A world of difference existed between the sparsely populated plains of Manchuria and the crowded villages south of the Yangzi. As there was not enough land to be distributed to the poor, the pledge not to interfere with

‘rich peasants’ was soon broken. In Sichuan it was enough for a farmer actually to make a profit in order to be classified as a ‘landlord’. Families who owned a pot of white sugar or a buffalo to plough the fields were denounced so that their meagre possessions could be confiscated. Even north of the Yangzi, where parts of the countryside had already gone through a gruelling process of land distribution in 1947–8, villagers were subjected to a second round of terror. In Shandong many ordinary farmers were randomly arrested and beaten, regardless of whether or not they met the definition of a ‘landlord’. In Pingyi county, where only a quarter of those locked up were landowners, a local party official proclaimed that ‘from now on we should kill somebody at every one of our meetings’. Indiscriminate beatings at village rallies were ‘common practice’: ‘some of the cadres drop hints that encourage beatings, others do not interfere when beatings take place’. In Teng county, as one party secretary reported, people were topped with dunce’s caps, forced to kneel and then beaten or stripped and exposed to the cold in the winter. Some had their hair pulled out, a few their ears bitten off. In the village of Xigangshan villagers urinated on their victims.<sup>29</sup>

Parts of the countryside descended into a spiral of violence because so many ordinary farmers who were classified as ‘landlords’ or ‘rich peasants’ started to retaliate. In a village in Guizhou, seventy-year-old Zhang Baoshan was mistakenly classified as a landlord. Party activists dragged the man to a rally where he was beaten, tortured and drenched in freezing water. Infuriated, two of his sons went on a rampage, hacking several of their enemies to death. Unable to return home, the sons hid deep in the mountains where they were soon hunted down and lynched by a search party. A frenzied mob cut off their tongues and genitals. Their bodies were burned and the ashes thrown into a river. The entire family of Zhang Baoshan, more than twenty people, were beaten before being sent to prison. An investigation later showed that eight people in the village lost their lives as a consequence of random labelling of the poor as ‘landlords’.<sup>30</sup>

Sometimes whole villages turned against the communists. In Lanfeng county, Henan, on average one farmer was killed every three days in April 1950. Some of the victims were ordinary people on their way to market. They were set upon by cadres who beat them with the butts of their rifles. After one woman had been shot in the stomach and died amid screaming children and frightened villagers, the crowd turned, overpowering the perpetrators and seizing their weapons.<sup>31</sup>

More subtle forms of resistance appeared everywhere. Despite all the efforts of the work teams in charge of land reform – the painstaking collection

of information on the local power structure, the carefully choreographed meetings to ‘speak bitterness’, the endless propaganda, the village rallies backed up by the power of local militias – ordinary people had qualms about persecuting and stealing from their erstwhile neighbours. Many knew how to keep their emotions in check, locking them away deep inside, to be exhibited only on appropriate occasions. They learned how to perform as a way to survive. Esther Cheo, who joined the People’s Liberation Army in 1949, saw how people could switch their emotions on and off during village meetings: ‘I noticed one woman shout and scream at the landlord. As soon as her part was played out, she returned to the crowd, took her baby who had been peacefully suckling at another woman’s breast, and continued feeding it at her own, while she calmly watched the next participant in the struggle meeting.’ Those who shouted the loudest sometimes supported the victims, for instance by furtively returning the spoils that had accrued to them. In Xushui, a young party activist called Sun handed back a bucket of corn to a former employer who had always treated him like a family member. Sun was stripped of his party membership.<sup>32</sup>

As work teams in charge of land reform fanned out south of the Yangzi, they encountered powerful clans that were far more diverse and integrated than the rhetoric of class warfare implied. Entire villages shared the same surname. In Hubei, some of the leaders paraded at denunciation meetings managed to turn the assembled throng against the cadres. In Fang county the farmers unanimously agreed not to dispossess any of those targeted as landlords. In Hunan some wealthy farmers slaughtered their cattle, sold the land and bartered their tools before land reform had even started. In Xiangtan one man pulled down his house to sell the bricks. In two counties some 27,000 fir trees on private land were chopped down before they could be redistributed. In Zhejiang, local leaders harangued the villagers against land reform, warning them that ‘year after year the taxes will increase’: a few predicted that ‘it will be hard to avoid famine in future’.<sup>33</sup>

In Sichuan a few landowners took control of the situation, carefully studying the land-reform law, assembling the villagers and staging fake ‘struggle sessions’ before the work teams had even arrived. They determined their own class status, ascribing the label of ‘landlord’ to a mere handful of people. Some voluntarily distributed parts of their land. Others deposited, bartered or gifted their property to other villagers, making sure that people actually sided with them. In some cases entire villages stood firmly behind those denounced as ‘landlords’. And when all else failed, some would



rather torch their houses than hand them over to the mob. This happened all over Sichuan.<sup>34</sup>

The party interpreted popular resistance as clear evidence that the dark powers of feudalism were still holding sway over the countryside. The less support it found among the villagers, the louder its call for violence. Landlords and counter-revolutionaries, party officials claimed, aided and abetted from abroad, poisoned the minds of the villagers with religion, infiltrated peasant associations with their henchmen and corrupted party cadres with offers of cash and women. Nothing short of terror would overcome the forces of reaction, as ever more murder was mandated. On 21 April 1951, provincial head Li Jingquan ordered that 6,000 landlords, several thousand of them lingering in prison, be paraded and executed in west Sichuan in order to give land reform greater momentum: 'In land reform we should arrest those who lie low, link up with foreign powers and commit counter-revolutionary crimes: we should kill half of them, or about four thousand, in addition to some one or two thousand currently in gaol who still need to be executed. If we follow this plan we will execute five to six thousand of them, which corresponds roughly to the principle of killing a small batch in land reform.' His report was endorsed in Chongqing by his superior Deng Xiaoping, the man in charge of the south-west of China.<sup>35</sup>

Other regions were just as tough, although precise figures are hard to come by. In Luotian, a Hubei county covered in chestnut forests, as many as one out of every 330 villagers was shot. In a mere twenty days in May 1951, over 170 people were executed as 'landlords'. First some of the victims were asked to surrender 500 kilos of grain. Then they were asked for a tonne. Then they were shot. Many of the targets were not wealthy at all, but 'the masses did not dare to speak out' in denunciation rallies.<sup>36</sup>

Mao himself set the tone. In the Pearl River delta in Guangdong, one of the wealthiest and most commercialised regions in China, many landowners had extensive contacts with entrepreneurs from Hong Kong. Large plots of land were also bought by overseas Chinese who planned to come home for retirement. And all along the coast there were villages dominated by wealthy emigrants, their modern houses and foreign manners standing in stark contrast to some of the more traditional hamlets inland. Across the province more than 6 million people were family dependants of overseas Chinese: many women, children and elderly people relied on remittances. In total one-fifth of the land belonged to emigrants living abroad. Fang Fang, the party boss in Guangdong, was aware of their economic importance and tried to protect some of their land from expropriation. In 1952

Mao sent Tao Zhu to take over from Fang Fang. Tao Zhu had made his name in ruthlessly suppressing all opposition in Guangxi, killing tens of thousands of people accused of being 'landlords' or 'counter-revolutionaries'. Some compared him to a tank, crushing all enemies in his path.

Fang was soon summoned by Mao for an audience in Beijing, accused of 'localism', purged and never heard of again. In May 1952 alone, over 6,000 cadres in Guangdong were demoted or persecuted for having followed an 'incorrect party line'. Across the province, ferocious beatings and random killings of landowners and wealthy farmers became the norm. 'Every Village Bleeds, Every Household Fights' was the slogan. People were trussed up, hung from beams, buried up to the neck and torched. In Huiyang county, just across the border from Hong Kong, close to 200 people were killed. Further north in Chaozhou, over 700 committed suicide. In a matter of three months, more than 4,000 people lost their lives, either beaten to death or hounded to their graves by constant persecution.<sup>37</sup>

Poverty became the norm. The relative prosperity that some families had achieved through generations of hard work evaporated overnight. People who had managed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps thanks to a combination of initiative, diligence and perseverance became outcasts. Expertise and experience in the village were derided; success became a mark of the exploiter. Poor peasants and poor workers were extolled instead. They were born red. 'To be Poor is Glorious,' the party proclaimed. But the villagers not only took pride in their poverty, they became fearful of wealth. In Shandong many refused to do more than the strict minimum: 'the party likes the poor, and the poorer the better'. None other than Kang Sheng, put in charge of the province in 1949, reported that productivity in the areas where land distribution had been carried out was in free fall, as villagers believed that it was 'glorious to be poor'. Across the north of China, agricultural output plummeted by a third. Civil war caused massive destruction and population displacement, but as some of the cadres themselves put it rather bluntly, 'land reform has destroyed production'.<sup>38</sup>

A host of different disincentives reinforced each other, creating a vicious circle of impoverishment. The rights to the land were vague, and villagers never felt quite secure in their ownership of confiscated property. Above all, in ferocious campaigns fuelled by fear, greed and jealousy, nobody wanted to rise above the others. The plots themselves were small and often dispersed across the countryside. Many of the beneficiaries lacked the knowledge, utensils, seeds and fertiliser to cultivate the land. The link between

the village and the market was disrupted. Shops and enterprises run by landowners were ransacked or went bankrupt. Subsidiary occupations once pursued by villagers were viewed as ‘capitalist’ activities. In Sichuan, one of the country’s wealthiest provinces, about two-thirds of the land distributed to the poor produced less than before.<sup>39</sup>

Another form of impoverishment appeared. Many of the people targeted during the campaign were hardly better off than their neighbours, but across the country there were also families who had accumulated considerable material wealth. Whether scholars, merchants or politicians, many were committed collectors of art objects, sometimes just a few small curios, ink-stones, water droppers or figurines to decorate a desk or complement a study, sometimes more extensive collections of rare manuscripts, bronze coins, wooden furniture or ink paintings. In fact, such was the respect for high culture in a country governed for centuries by scholar officials that few households that could afford it lived without some token of the past.

Some of this was distributed during land reform, but much was destroyed, to the point where in June 1951 the Ministry of Culture ordered all antiques and rare books confiscated during land reform to be collected and inventoried. In many cases it was too late. In Shandong, for instance, most of the antiques had already been burned or consigned to the scrap heap, recycled as so many relics of an exploitative past. As an investigation carried out by the party revealed, ‘Everywhere old books that were considered to contain feudal ideas were thrown away or used as old paper.’ Much larger remnants of feudalism were attacked. In Jining, the Taibai Tower, where the famed Tang-dynasty poet Li Bai was rumoured to have lived, was torn down (a replica was erected in 1952). In Liaocheng the grave of the eighteenth-century poet and painter Gao Fenghan was excavated. In Jimo the labouring masses helped themselves to six graves dating back to the Han dynasty. In Zibo several Buddhist statues and temples, seen as so many marks of superstition, were mutilated. In Laoshan, a coastal mountain near Qingdao considered to be one of the birthplaces of Taoism, a large collection of more than a hundred Ming and Qing scriptures from the Huayan Temple were used as scrap. Some of the classics of Buddhism were used to roll cigarettes. There were many other examples, ‘too many to enumerate’, according to one report, as many cadres treated historical relics as ‘rubbish’ or ‘superstition’.<sup>40</sup>

By all accounts, by the end of 1951 over 10 million landlords had been expropriated and more than 40 per cent of the land had changed hands. The exact number of victims killed in the land reform will never be known, but it is unlikely to have been fewer than 1.5 to 2 million people from 1947 to 1952. Millions more had their lives destroyed by being stigmatised as exploiters and class enemies.<sup>41</sup>

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## The Great Terror

By the summer of 1950 the communists had few friends left. The party, Mao explained to his colleagues, was ‘hitting out in all directions’, making nothing but enemies. Capitalists disliked the communist party, the jobless were restless and most workers were disgruntled thanks to the economic slump. In the countryside villagers were taxed to the hilt, while in the cities intellectuals feared losing their jobs. Those working in the arts resented political interference. Opposition to the new regime was rife in religious circles. ‘The entire country is tense,’ Mao noted, and ‘we are rather lonely’. The party had to make friends and isolate its enemies one by one. Ease up the pressure on the ethnic minorities, he advocated. Appease private merchants, create a united front with democrats and take a long view in reforming intellectuals. ‘Advance slowly.’<sup>1</sup>

Who were the real enemies who should be tackled? ‘Our general policy’, Mao continued, ‘is to eliminate the remnant Nationalist forces, the secret agents and the bandits, overthrow the landlord class, liberate Taiwan and Tibet and fight imperialism to the end.’<sup>2</sup>

Less than three weeks after Chairman Mao’s speech, the North Korean People’s Army crossed the 38th-parallel border and invaded South Korea. On 25 June 1950, the United Nations Security Council unanimously condemned the invasion, and a few days later President Truman rallied to the defence of his South Korean ally. A UN counter-offensive under General Douglas MacArthur drove the North Koreans back past the 38th parallel on 1 October 1950, the first anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Two hundred thousand Chinese troops secretly entered North Korea on 18 October. A week later they attacked the UN troops near the Sino-Korean border.

The war provided a pretext to rally popular support for the regime and strike hard against the enemies Mao had described only months earlier. On 10 October, traditionally celebrated as National Day by the nationalists, Mao issued a directive to liquidate ‘remnant nationalist forces’, ‘secret agents’, ‘bandits’ and other ‘counter-revolutionaries’ who stood in the path of revolution. For a full year a Great Terror would run alongside land reform, shaking the country to its very roots and forcing people from all walks of life to take sides.

How many ‘bandits’ and ‘secret agents’ were still threatening to overthrow the communist regime in October 1950? Quite a few according to the propaganda machine, relentlessly pumping out dark warnings of sabotage and subversion by hidden spies and fifth columnists. Paranoia was intrinsic to the regime, which lived in fear of its own shadow. The party had long developed a habit of blaming every setback on real or imagined enemies. Behind every poisoned well or granary that went up in flames lurked a spy or landlord. Every act of resistance by ordinary farmers – and there were many – was seen as proof of counter-revolution. Tension was also deliberately cultivated to keep people on edge and justify ever more intrusive forms of policing.

On the other hand there was a real threat to the new regime in much of the south. As we have seen, dozens of armed rebellions and popular insurrections endangered the regime in provinces such as Hubei, Sichuan and Guizhou. In Guangxi, a subtropical province covered in karst mountains and lush forests on the border of Vietnam, over 1,400 cadres and 700 troops had been ambushed and killed by opposition elements by the summer of 1950. The communists had eliminated 170,000 nationalist troops from the province in the first months of liberation, but soon violence flared up again, as villagers joined the opposition. In Yulin county over 200 villages took part in armed rebellions. In a single village in Yining county a third of all men vanished into the forest to join the rebel forces. For decades the communists had waged a highly mobile war on the nationalist government in scattered raids and ambushes, striking vulnerable targets only to withdraw immediately into the countryside. ‘The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue.’ So Mao had written in 1930. Now his own party faced the threat of guerrilla warfare in the south.<sup>3</sup>

Mao singled out Guangxi for special blame, lambasting its leaders for ‘shocking leniency’ towards the insurgents. The province acted quickly, killing 3,000 guerrilla fighters in the first couple of months following the 10 October 1950 directive. Then Mao sent Tao Zhu, the man popularly characterised as a ‘tank’, to crush all opposition, killing 15,000 people by March 1951. Over 100,000 were sent to prison, where many died of starvation and sickness. In parts of Yulin a fifth of the entire population was put behind bars. Others were labelled as landlords, their wives and children persecuted in their absence. By the summer of 1951, Tao Zhu wired a message to Mao:

‘Guangxi: 450,000 bandits pacified; 40,000 killed; one-third may or may not have deserved death.’<sup>4</sup>

By the time the campaign ended in October 1951, a total of 46,200 had been killed, or 2.56 per thousand of the total population in the province. In other words, more than one person out of every 400 had been executed.<sup>5</sup>

But the terror was just as relentless elsewhere. The man Mao entrusted with overseeing the operation was Luo Ruiqing. He was born into a landlord family in Nanchong, a region rich in rice, oranges and silkworms in mountainous Sichuan. He never smiled, having suffered a facial injury while fighting against the nationalists. His mouth was frozen in a permanent rictus. Like Lin Biao, Luo was trained in the famed Whampoa Military Academy under Chiang Kai-shek, but joined the communist party in 1928. He was one of the first to be sent to the Soviet Union, where he worked with the secret police. In Yan’an, he was put in charge of cleaning up an anti-Mao faction in the rival Fourth Front Army. This he apparently did with such ‘crudeness, savagery and maliciousness’, according to one high-profile refugee, that he earned the gratitude of the Chairman. Once he became head of the security machine in Beijing, he hung a huge portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky in his office. The founder of the Cheka, the infamous state security organisation in the Soviet Union, was his model and mentor.<sup>6</sup>

Luo was an essential cog in the machinery of repression, transmitting the Chairman’s orders directly to the provincial leaders. When Li Xiannian, the leader of Hubei, went to see him in Beijing in January 1951, a mere 220 counter-revolutionaries had been liquidated in his province. The killings accelerated. By February 8,000 suspects had been executed, followed by a further 7,000 in the spring. Soon 37,000 people had been eliminated, as parts of the countryside descended into a reign of terror where cadres ruled by the gun. So habitual became reliance on terror that Li Xiannian could no longer restrain the campaign he had started. Some local officials refused to stop the killings, using terror as a routine tool of control. They blackmailed their superiors when told to curb the executions: ‘If I am not allowed to kill people, I won’t help out with production and I won’t mobilise the masses. I’ll just wait till you issue me with your permission and then I’ll work on the masses.’ In the end, more than 45,000 people were killed, or 1.75 per thousand of the population in Hubei.<sup>7</sup>

Like steel production or grain output, death came with a quota mandated from above. Luo Ruiqing could not possibly oversee the arrest, trial and disposal of the many millions who became the targets of terror, so instead Mao handed down a killing quota as a rough guide for action. The norm, he



felt, was one per thousand, a ratio he was willing to adjust to the particular circumstances of each region. His subordinates kept track of local killing rates like bean counters, occasionally negotiating for a higher quota. In May 1951 Guangxi province, for instance, was told to kill more, even though a rate of 1.63 per thousand had already been achieved. Guizhou province, destabilised by popular uprisings, requested permission to kill three per thousand, and the Liuzhou region five per thousand. 'The provincial party committee of Guizhou requests a target of three per thousand, that too is too much, I feel. This is how I look at it: we can go over one per thousand, but not by too much.' Once a death rate of two per thousand had been achieved, the Chairman opined, people should be sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to work in labour camps.<sup>8</sup>

Mao adjudicated the numbers, posing as a voice of moderation. He lashed out at 'rightists' who fell behind their target but reined in the zeal of 'leftists'. Words of praise were handed out in directives circulated among the top leadership. In March 1951 the Chairman lauded Henan for having killed 12,000 counter-revolutionaries, as the province steeled itself for liquidating another batch of 20,000 in the spring, bringing the total to about 32,000. 'In a province of 30 million that is a good number.' But figures were merely a guide, he warned, as more might have to be killed. Mao emphasised that the terror should be 'stable' (*wen*), 'precise' (*zhun*) and 'ruthless' (*hen*): the campaign should be carried out with surgical precision, without any slippage into random slaughter, which would undermine the standing of the party. 'But before anything else, the term "ruthless" has to be emphasised.' Perusing the reports he was handed by Luo Ruiqing, he nudged the country further: 'In provinces where few have been killed a large batch should be killed; the killings can absolutely not be allowed to stop too early.'<sup>9</sup>

Mao was deliberately vague, forcing his underlings to pore over every one of his numerous remarks, speeches and directives for guidance on how to carry out the terror. He allowed his subordinates to compete with each other in presenting new ideas and policies. Mao casually picked and chose from among their proposals. This form of government allowed ambitious elements to push for a more radical implementation of what they thought were the Chairman's true intentions, although it left them open to criticism later if their initiatives backfired. It also meant that everybody in the top leadership became implicated in the terror. Nobody merely acted under orders, as leaders created their own guidelines, trying to guess what was required of them. Deng Zihui, the regional boss of south China, and Deng

Xiaoping, for instance, suggested in February 1951 that between half and two-thirds of all counter-revolutionaries be executed. Mao approved, on condition that the killings be 'secretly controlled, without disorder or mistakes'.<sup>10</sup>

Another proposal came from Rao Shushi, the man in control of the east of the country. On 29 March 1951, Rao proposed that the campaign be moved from the 'outer circle' to the 'inner circle', meaning that the fight should be taken to traitors and spies within the party. Mao approved, sweeping aside the idea that the party was 'killing too much'. A central directive on a purge of enemies within the ranks was issued on 21 May 1951.<sup>11</sup>

By April 1951 three out of every five provinces had reached or surpassed the target of one per thousand. In Guizhou three per thousand had been eliminated, despite the words of admonition from the Chairman.<sup>12</sup> Over a million people lingered in prison, and Luo Ruiqing ordered all arrests to cease for several months so that the backlog could be cleared. But by the summer the lull in the slaughter came to an end, as Luo expressed regret for the kindness shown to enemies of the regime and announced that 'we must kill and resolutely eliminate the remnant forces of counter-revolution'.<sup>13</sup>

Mao oversaw the campaign from his headquarters next to the Forbidden City, casually adjudicating the death rate according to each case. In a few places the terror barely lived up to its name, petering out in the hands of highly selective cadres. But many of Mao's underlings were willing executioners. In an increasingly fractured society, the terror was also driven from below by people seeking retribution, settling old grudges or righting personal wrongs in the name of revolution.

The party archives are full of cases of blatant abuse driven by cadres eager to show their determination to stamp out counter-revolution. In Yanxing county, a wealthy region in Yunnan covered in salt flats, over a hundred middle-school students were arrested and tortured in April 1951 after an anonymous denunciation reached the local party headquarters. Wu Liening, ten years old, was hung from a beam and beaten. Ma Silie, aged eight, was tied up on a cross in a kneeling position. A wooden pole was placed across his thighs and pressed down by two of his tormentors, crushing his legs and knees on the concrete floor. Even Liu Wendi, aged six, was accused of being the head of a spying squad. Two of the children were tortured to death. This was not an isolated example. A team of militia in Sichuan also tried to uncover counter-revolutionaries among schoolchil-

dren. Some had both hands and feet tied up while being suspended upside down, others were made to go through mock executions. Three were tortured to death, another five of the children committed suicide. About fifty of the victims survived the abuse, although many were crippled or maimed for life.<sup>14</sup>

In Guangdong a full third of all the victims were wrongly accused – by the standards of the party itself. In Luoding county, a single case of suspected theft by a student led to the arrest and interrogation of 340 young people aged thirteen to twenty-five. Only after hundreds of letters of complaint were sent to the provincial inspectorate was one leading official dispatched a year later to investigate the case.<sup>15</sup>

In the fight against counter-revolutionaries entire hamlets were mistakenly eradicated. In one notorious incident in Bigu, Jiangxi, a squad leader discovered smoke coming from a cluster of homes suspected of harbouring enemies. He opened fire without asking any questions. Then all the houses were torched. Twenty-one people were killed, another twenty-six victims later dying of their wounds. All except one were women and small children.<sup>16</sup>

As cadres rushed to achieve their killing quota, false arrests were common. They reached over 50 per cent in parts of Guizhou. In Congjiang county, fewer than a third of all arrests were based on any kind of concrete proof. In Chang'an village, Xie Chaoxiang aroused suspicion by merely knocking on the door of a landlord. He was locked up and beaten till he denounced forty-eight other farmers, most of them poor. Eight of these were arrested and beaten unconscious, doused with water, revived and beaten again. Six committed suicide. In another case a man killed himself after he was accused of having murdered eight people in 1929 – when he was a baby aged one.<sup>17</sup>

Merely looking suspicious could determine a person's fate. In Qujing county, Yunnan, 150 'bandit spies' lingered in prison without any supporting evidence. As the cadre in charge explained, 'if they look like bandits, and they look like spies, we call them bandit spies'. A mere link with the old regime, no matter how tenuous, could lead to death. In Fushun, a county in Sichuan, 4,000 government employees were arrested for having had contact with the nationalists at one point or another in their careers. Often the local cadres had to second-guess what their superiors expected from them, in much the same way that party leaders tried to divine what their Chairman really wanted. Both Yunnan and Sichuan were under the firm grip of Deng Xiaoping, who wrote to Mao to announce that counter-revolutionaries were

rife in the local government, while up to 90 per cent of the local cadres in some villages in Yunnan were spies, landlords or other bad elements.<sup>18</sup>

As with land reform, leaders everywhere were afraid of falling behind, comparing their performance with that of others. Villages, counties and provinces emulated each other, preferring to kill too many rather than too few – and risk being purged as ‘rightists’. In Yunnan some cadres killed at random: ‘Some places simply look at how many have been arrested and how many have been killed elsewhere and then hurriedly proceed to arrest and kill within a few days.’ Some party members were so afraid of appearing to be lacklustre that they had to steel themselves. As a party official enjoined: ‘You must hate even if you feel no hatred, you must kill even if you do not wish to kill.’ Thousands were silently executed in order to fulfil and surpass the quota.<sup>19</sup>

As the gaols – from formal prisons to schools, temples and clan halls commandeered by the military – were overflowing, the authorities sometimes thought it more convenient to execute the inmates rather than go through all the formalities of an investigation. In west Sichuan, as Hu Yao-bang reported, ‘there are extremely few people sentenced to a term of five or more years, as some comrades feel that if a prisoner is given a long sentence, he might as well be killed to save time’.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes party members used the terror to pursue their own vendettas against the local population, trying to conceal their activities from their superiors. All over Sichuan local cadres killed secretly, eradicating their enemies without any of the public rallies mandated by Beijing. In Maogong, a town where the communists had regrouped under Mao Zedong after crossing the rugged Great Snow Mountain during the Long March in June 1935, only ten victims of a four-month reign of terror were announced in a public notice. A further 170 were covertly assassinated. Twenty were stabbed to death with bayonets. A few of their heads were cut off and displayed outside the city gates. Some of those killed were farmers who had never participated in any opposition to the party. Maogong was an area inhabited by ethnic groups, and only stark violence, the local cadres reasoned, would bring them to heel.<sup>21</sup>

By May 1951 the situation was slipping out of control in those regions of south China controlled by Deng Zihui and Deng Xiaoping. The Chairman intervened, ordering that authority to kill must be transferred one level up, removing the initiative from the counties.<sup>22</sup> A frenzy of killing ensued, as party officials hurried to eliminate their targets as fast as possible before the impending deadline. In the Fuling region, made up of some ten counties

with terraced fields along the Yangzi River in Sichuan, they disposed of 2,676 suspects in ten days. A further 500 were executed in the two days following the deadline, by which time 8,500 people had been killed in little more than two months. Fuling was not exceptional, although the full scope of what happened will never be known. When underlings asked the party secretary in Wenjiang county to approve further killings from a batch of 127 prisoners, he simply said, 'Just have a look and pick a few.' Fifty-seven were shot within three days after the moratorium had been imposed. In west Sichuan, a thousand victims were systematically slaughtered every day for a gruesome week before the authority to kill was lost.<sup>23</sup>

Across the country people were tortured or beaten to death. A few were bayoneted and decapitated. But for the most part they were shot. This was not always as straightforward as it might seem. In the ancient city of Kaifeng, dotted with temples and pagodas, the executioners first tried to shoot their targets in the head, but this turned out to be so messy that after a while they aimed for the heart instead. This too proved difficult. Some shots missed, leaving the victims writhing on the floor in agony so that they had to be shot again. Killing demanded skills that came only with practice.<sup>24</sup>

Occasionally a victim had to kneel and bow, as a long machete-like knife came swinging down to sever the head from the body. In Guangxi the heads were sometimes suspended by ropes on wooden frames, resembling football goalposts, at the entrance to the market place. The crimes of the victims were written beside the posts.<sup>25</sup>

The countryside echoed to the crack of the executioner's bullet, as real and imaginary enemies were forced to kneel on makeshift platforms and executed from behind before the assembled villagers. Usually only a few of the targets were shot. This is how Zhang Yingrong, who was carried on a wooden plank on to the stage after being beaten, remembers the occasion:

There were ten others on the stage for denunciation, all tied with ropes. My eldest brother was there beside me, his arms held behind him by two militiamen, his body bent to 90 degrees. I lay on the wooden plank, looking up. The rain had stopped. Amid the loud shouting, I could hear the river nearby. The clouds had dispersed and the sky was clear blue. I thought: People lived harmoniously under the same sky in the same village for many years. Why did they act like this now? Why did they hate each other and torture each other like that? Was that what the Communist revolution was all about? All the 'class enemies' had been beaten; their faces were swollen and their heads scarred. Beatings couldn't quench the Communists' thirst. They started killing. After that meeting, all the former officials under the old regime were executed,

including my brother; their children were sentenced to ten or twenty years in jail, where some lost their minds, or died.<sup>26</sup>

After public executions, family members were often allowed to collect the bodies. In the countryside silent figures would move stealthily towards the corpses at dusk, clutching some straw with which to wrap the bodies and improvised stretchers to carry them back home. But sometimes the killers blew up the bodies of their victims with dynamite, a practice so common that some provinces had to issue a formal ban against it.

Some victims were executed away from the public eye, in forests, near ravines and riverbanks, alone or in batches. The bodies were thrown into pits or shallow mass graves, but a few were left to rot. Relatives often spent weeks trying to find the corpses of their loved ones. Those who were fortunate collected what remains they could gather and gave them a discreet burial. Zhang Mao'en had to wait ten months before receiving permission to collect the body of his brother, who had been shot by the roadside and dumped into a ravine in Yunnan. 'My brother's rotting corpse looked like a fallen tree stuck in a stream. My second oldest brother and my mother went down into the water to drag it out, and it fell to pieces. We collected the bones, washed them, and put them in a box we had brought with us.'<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes the bodies were eaten by wild animals. In Hebei some of the mass graves were so shallow that feral dogs dug up the remains and devoured them. In Sichuan one woman suspected of having hidden a gun was dragged away and so badly tortured that she hung herself from a tree. Her body was dumped in the forest and eaten by wild boars.<sup>28</sup>

The terror initially claimed fewer lives in the cities. Party leaders were concerned about the adverse publicity that too many executions might generate. They also had to compromise with the professionals, businessmen, entrepreneurs and industrialists on whom the economy still depended. But the conciliatory tone soon changed.

On 13 March 1951 some 200 military leaders assembled in Jinan, the provincial capital of Shandong, to attend a concert organised in their honour. As applause erupted at the end of a folk performance, a young man stood up at one of the tables, walked towards Huang Zuyan, a top-ranking military leader, and fired a gun. The bullet entered his neck and exited through the jawbone. Huang collapsed on his chair before slumping to the ground, covered in blood. As the guests panicked and hid under the tables, the aggressor fired one more shot before killing himself. Huang later died

on his way to hospital. Wang Jumin, the assassin, was thirty-four years old and had joined the communist party in 1943. He had turned against the cause after his family was attacked during land reform.

Mao put the party on high alert. Here was a case that showed how devious the enemy could be: penetrating the party, lying low for years before suddenly striking out against leaders at the highest level. 'We absolutely cannot be irresolute. To tolerate evil is to abet it. This is critical.'<sup>29</sup>

Within days of the assassination, Mao demanded 'several batches of big killings' in the cities. When writing to Huang Jing, the party secretary of Tianjin, he invoked the will of the people to justify more shootings: 'The people say that killing counter-revolutionaries is even more joyful than a good downpour.'<sup>30</sup>

Raids were organised across the country. In Shandong, where the assassination had taken place only weeks earlier, the police rounded up over 4,000 suspects overnight on 1 April. In Jinan, where 1,200 were arrested, people spent the night peering fearfully through the windows, trying to find out who was being dragged away. Within days several dozen had been executed in public, attracting words of praise from the Chairman. Shandong, he pronounced, was a model for those 'faint-hearted comrades' who failed to carry out the campaign resolutely.<sup>31</sup>

Three weeks later, on 28 April, the police swept through Shanghai, Nanjing and fourteen other cities in one co-ordinated raid, targeting 16,855 individuals. It was a Saturday, and Robert Loh, a returned student who had joined a Shanghai university two years earlier, spent the evening marking student essays. 'For hours I heard the screaming of sirens and the roar of lorries speeding through the streets. I was uneasily aware that something momentous was happening, but I was not alarmed. The next morning, however, the servants reported in consternation that thousands of people had been arrested. They said that all those who had held positions in the Nationalist Party under the previous regime were taken by the security police.'<sup>32</sup>

The doors of those who had been arrested were sealed with a large red paper X, meaning that the belongings of the occupant were not to be disturbed until the police had investigated them. So many red crosses appeared on doors that the Shanghai police took over public buildings as prisons. The raid had been well prepared. For weeks before the night of the arrests the Public Security Bureau had requested all those who had worked for the nationalists to register. The stated purpose was to give those who had made 'political mistakes' a chance to 'start life anew'. Autobiographies had to be



submitted and details of every known person had to be provided, whether family, friend or associate. With every full confession came the promise of lenient treatment.

Public executions followed. 'One of the execution grounds was near the university. Every day we would see truckloads of prisoners. While we were in our classes we would hear the terrible shooting. The lorries carrying away the corpses dripped blood onto the road that ran past the university buildings.' Robert Loh, like others across the country, was forced to attend more than one shooting. The stated purpose was to educate the people, although he left more terrorised and sickened than enlightened.

I remember especially the trial of a factory foreman who had extorted money from his employees and had seduced women workers under him. When found guilty, he was shoved off the platform. He rolled grotesquely because of his tied hands. While he was still on the ground, a policeman shot him through the head. I was about ten paces away. I saw the splatter of the victim's brains, and the obscene twitching of his body.<sup>33</sup>

With the executions came a wave of suicides, as desperate people threw themselves from tall buildings along the Bund. The police soon erected nets which jutted out from windows on the first floor. Instead of leaping from windows, candidates for death now took running jumps from the roof. One man landed on a rickshaw, killing himself, the puller and his passenger. After the police and the military had started guarding all tall buildings, corpses appeared daily in the rivers of Shanghai.<sup>34</sup>

Mass executions were held in every city. In Beijing they were chaired by the mayor. Peng Zhen shouted at a mass meeting in Beijing: 'How should we deal with this herd of beastly tyrants, bandits, traitors and spies who are guilty of the most heinous crimes?'

Answered a crowd of followers: 'Execute them by firing squad!'

Peng: 'We have already disposed of a number of counter-revolutionaries, but there are still some in prison. Besides, there are still spies and special agents hiding in Beijing. What shall we do with them?'

The crowd: 'Suppress the counter-revolutionaries resolutely!'

Peng: 'Among the accused today there are despots in the markets, among fishmongers, real-estate brokers, water carriers and nightsoil scavengers. How should we cope with these feudal remnants?'

The crowd: 'Execute them by firing squad!'<sup>35</sup>

The large gatherings in stadiums in Shanghai, Tianjin and Beijing were carefully orchestrated, from speeches scripted in advance to ritual denunciations of victims on stage. But smaller batches were executed in front of

party activists as a way of testing their resolve, determination and loyalty to the cause. Esther Cheo, who was being groomed for promotion to cadre, had to attend a mass execution in Beijing: 'We were taken in a lorry to the place of execution, near the famous tourist spot, the Temple of Heaven. The victims were kneeling down beside cheap coffins, their hands tied behind their backs with wire. About six security police moved nonchalantly along shooting them in the back of the head. As they fell, some of their heads split open, some just fell with a neat little hole, while others had their brains splattered all over the dusty ground and on to the clothes of the next victims.' As she turned away in revulsion, a cadre grabbed her by the shoulders. 'Take a good look!' he shouted. 'This is what the revolution is all about!' She screamed and wanted to hide her face, but he held her tight and forced her head around to make her look. She saw her companions running over the bodies, cheering.<sup>36</sup>

Few victims ever spoke out. The cadres in charge had honed their skills in mass rallies during land reform, and they knew how to prevent a last-ditch attempt by the condemned to proclaim their innocence or shout anti-communist slogans. Threats of retaliation against family members were very effective. Other measures were used. As one organiser explained: 'We put a wire ring around every accused person. If he tries to struggle or resist, the soldiers have only to pull the wire back against his windpipe and choke him.' Sometimes local authorities mandated a rope instead of wire.<sup>37</sup>

There were fewer slippages in the cities, where it is unlikely that more than one per thousand of the population was killed. Mao thought that fewer would be acceptable in order not to antagonise the public. He calculated in April 1951: 'So in Beijing, with its population of about 2 million, over 10,000 have already been arrested and 700 of these have been killed, while another batch of 700 is scheduled for execution. Killing roughly 1,400 should be enough.'<sup>38</sup>

The campaign of terror was over by the end of 1951, but the killings never really stopped. With each new wave, ever larger sections of the population were brought into the fold. In Zhejiang, one of the smallest and most densely populated provinces, with valleys and plains along its coastline and mountain ranges covering most of its interior, a quarter of a million militia mounted guard along all the major roads at the peak of the campaign. Few enemies of the regime managed to escape from this tight network, and many died of hunger and cold in the mountains.<sup>39</sup>

But along Zhejiang's ragged coast were several thousand islands where the hand of the state barely reached. A huge waterland covered south China, veined with canals, guttered and bankless meandering rivers, fields flooded in terraces and lakes both natural and artificial. Even as most cities built asphalt, concrete and macadam roads for modern transportation, water travel continued to be popular. All along China's busy coast, freighters, tankers and ferries plied their trade next to fishing trawlers and traditional junks. The navigable rivers also swarmed with traffic, ranging from lorchas with batten lug sails to modern motor ships.

The inhabitants of this water world engaged in fishing and marine farming. Some were sea nomads, traditionally treated like outcasts and long barred from living on shore or marrying land people. Living in the Pearl River delta in south China, the Tanka viewed water as the safe element, land being fraught with danger. They spoke their own dialect, mooring their sailing junks and shrimping vessels side by side to form vast flotillas which even had their own floating temples and religious boats. Many fled after liberation, taking their boats and families to Hong Kong, where they joined immense floating cities of up to 60,000 people near Aberdeen and Yau-matei.

Other groups thrived on the water. Generations of boatmen worked and lived on board large cargo-carrying vessels along the Grand Canal, an ancient waterway completed in the seventh century to haul the grain tribute from the south to the imperial capital in the north. Flower boats, often decorated in a riot of colours, carried the nightsoil that fertilised the fields in the provinces along the coast. Coal barges and grain boats cruised on the many waterways of Shandong, where the Yellow River intersected with the Grand Canal. On the Yangzi, the riverfront of Shashi was crowded with junks anchored side by side. Further upriver, a floating population of trackers waited to be hired to haul ships through the shoals and gorges of the Yangzi.

This watery world had always attracted smugglers, drifters and outcasts. The party saw it as the last refuge of counter-revolutionaries. In the ports along the Guangdong coast, the authorities believed, up to half of the population smuggled contraband goods and harboured enemy agents. Further north, on the islands along Fujian and Zhejiang, some were secretly in touch with the nationalists in Taiwan. The vice-minister of communications Wang Shoudao described the water population as a troublesome shadow world of 4 million people, steeped in feudal customs and riddled with gangsters who

controlled the ports along the coast. One out of every fifty was a counter-revolutionary, he calculated.<sup>40</sup>

Luo Ruiqing agreed. In December 1952 he set a killing quota for people living on the water of one per thousand. Nine times as many were to be deported to labour camps. Thousands were executed in the following year. Many more were taken from their boats and sent away to do hard labour, as the revolution finally moved from the land to the water.<sup>41</sup>

No one will ever know how many people were killed at the height of the Great Terror. The way statistics were gathered varied widely from one place to another and, more importantly, almost everywhere secret killings took place which were rarely reported. The most complete set of available figures are for the provinces under the leadership of Deng Zihui from October 1950 to November 1951. The total reached over 300,000 victims, or 1.7 per thousand of the local population (see Table 1, p. 100). And as Luo Ruiqing cautioned in his report on these provinces, a further 51,800 executions were earmarked to take place over the following months, most in Guangdong.<sup>42</sup>

The provinces under Deng Xiaoping, namely Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, are unlikely to have had killing rates below two per thousand. In the entire region of Fuling, composed of ten counties, the rate was 3.1 per thousand. Elsewhere in Sichuan the rate was as high as four per thousand. In the entire province of Guizhou, as we have seen, the rate was three per thousand. In an oral report to Deng Xiaoping the figure of 150,000 executions for all three provinces was mentioned in November 1951.<sup>43</sup>

In east China, as early as April 1951 the reported killing rates already stood at more than two per thousand in Fujian and Zhejiang. They were lower in Shandong, but even before the summer began the region as a whole claimed over 109,000 executions.<sup>44</sup>

In the north, the situation was more complex because so many killings had already taken place before the campaign was launched on 10 October 1950. In Hebei, for instance, 12,700 victims were executed in 1951, but in the year leading up to October 1950 more than 20,000 had already been killed.<sup>45</sup> All of the north-west, from Gansu to Xinjiang and Tibet, remains difficult to assess in the absence of reliable archival material. On the other hand, in Manchuria, already bloodied by the civil war, the killing rate was lowered to 0.5 per thousand in May 1951.<sup>46</sup>

Table 1: Total Executions Reported in Six Provinces, October 1950–November 1951

Province	Total killed	Death rate (per thousand)
Henan	56,700	1.67
Hubei	45,500	1.75
Hunan	61,400	1.92
Jiangxi	24,500	1.35
Guangxi	46,200	2.56
Guangdong	39,900	1.24
Total	301,800	1.69

Source: Report by Luo Ruiqing, Shaanxi, 23 Aug. 1952, 123-25-2, p. 357

The only total aggregate from the archives to date is Liu Shaoqi's figure of 710,000 provided at a top party convention in 1954, a figure Mao repeated two years later.<sup>47</sup> In a total population of approximately 550 million at the time, this can only have represented the lowest possible estimate, equivalent to a national killing rate of 1.2 per thousand. Liu was, no doubt, willing to present the party only with a politically acceptable figure, one far removed from the evidence contained in the reports filed at the time. A more plausible estimate comes from Bo Yibo, who in the autumn of 1952 mentioned more than 2 million victims. Although this figure cannot be verified, on balance it is the most likely estimate if both reported and secret killings of counter-revolutionaries from 1950 to the end of 1952 are taken into account.<sup>48</sup>

Several million people were sent to labour camps or subjected to surveillance by the local militia. Countless more became outcasts. As the politics of hatred tore apart the social fabric of community life, tens of millions of people were permanently branded as 'landlords', 'rich farmers', 'counter-revolutionaries' and 'criminals'. These were the black classes, who stood in opposition to the vanguard of the revolution, called red classes. But the label was inherited, meaning that the offspring of outcasts were also subjected to constant persecution and discrimination, all sanctioned by the party. These children would be singled out by teachers and bullied at school, sometimes attacked by followers of the Youth League on their way back home. The adults became the targets of every subsequent political campaign, some of them paraded, shouted at and spat upon in denunciation meetings no fewer than 300 times – before the Cultural Revolution even

started in 1966. They were the scapegoats of revolution, maintained alive in a permanent class struggle as a reminder to all of the fate awaiting those found to be on the wrong side of the party.<sup>49</sup>

But even those who survived the terror with their reputations intact now lived in fear. The party had no compunction in executing innocents, so innocence was no guarantee of survival. The unpredictable nature of the campaign was of course the very basis of terror, as nobody could be quite secure in thinking that they were beyond reproach. Formerly close communities drifted apart, leaving people isolated and fearful of each other. By the time the campaign was over, a breakdown in normal human relationships was noticeable. As Robert Loh observed: ‘During the persecution, friend had been made to betray friend; family members had been forced to denounce each other. The traditional warm hospitality of the Chinese, therefore, disappeared. We learned that the more friends we had, the more insecure our position. We began to know the fear of being isolated from our own group and of standing helplessly alone before the power of the State.’<sup>50</sup>

Society became more regimented, even for party members. In the months following the assassination of Huang Zuyan, sentinels started appearing at major government offices. Searches became more common. Li Changyu, who became a party member in January 1951, remembers: ‘In those days there were ad hoc guards at the office doors of high-level leaders, and a guard had to be posted at the gate whenever a large-scale meeting was to be held. Anyone entering the meeting place was searched, and if a weapon was found the high alert went up all around.’<sup>51</sup>

In the first year of liberation people could wander at will into different government organisations, or drop in to visit friends. But much tighter security regulations soon appeared everywhere. Esther Cheo noted:

Almost overnight each government organisation took on its own autonomy. We had to sign a paper at the gate and be questioned what our business was. The insistence on secrecy grew to ludicrous lengths. It was impressed upon all of us that there were spies everywhere. We were issued with identity cards, badges and more identity cards together with photographs. I still have them now, a little faded but clear enough to see my name, my place of birth and my rank. We became suspicious of strangers and each other, so that it was no longer comfortable to see each other, because it would mean a long report back on what we talked about and why. One became insular and only stayed within one's own place of work, lived among one's own fellow workers, shared the same dormitories, ate in the same canteens.

Erstwhile friendships faded away. Visitors stopped coming. People turned inward, leading increasingly blinkered lives. A mass exodus of all foreigners further deepened the country's insularity.<sup>52</sup>

## The Bamboo Curtain

The Festival of the Dead, according to the lunar calendar, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. A ceremony is traditionally held for those wandering ghosts who have not yet found their way to the next world. In 1951 the occasion came on 17 August, but instead of celebrating the festival with lanterns, songs and plays, in Beijing groups of people loitered on the streets, waiting for something to happen. They were unsure quite what to expect. There were obvious preparations for an execution, as groups of vehicles made their way towards the Bridge of Heaven, where most killings usually took place. When the formal procession finally arrived, onlookers were taken aback by what they saw. The first carriage, filled with armed soldiers, was followed by a jeep with a foreigner standing in the back. Tall and erect, with a long white beard, his hair brushed back, he peered into the distance with his hands bound together. Another jeep carried a Japanese man, also tied up and forced to stand. Several more vehicles followed, full of police officers who were laughing and apparently enjoying themselves. According to Radio Peking, the streets were thronged with people who shouted ‘Down with imperialism! Suppress counter-revolutionaries! Long live Chairman Mao!’ According to the sister-in-law of one of the condemned as well as the British embassy, the crowds were uncomfortably silent.<sup>1</sup>

Antonio Riva and Ruichi Yamaguchi were the first foreigners to be sentenced to death in communist China. Riva, an Italian pilot who had relocated to Beijing in the 1920s to train the nationalists, and Yamaguchi, a Japanese bookseller, were convicted in a one-hour trial of a plot to murder the Chairman. The conspirators, so the state media trumpeted, had planned to fire mortar shells at a reviewing stand outside Tiananmen Gate during National Day celebrations. Several other foreigners received long prison sentences as part of the conspiracy. The Italian bishop Tarcisio Martina, aged sixty-four, head of the Roman Catholic diocese of Yixian in Hebei province, was imprisoned for life (he was expelled in 1955 and died a few years later).

The evidence hinged on a mortar seized from Riva’s house and a drawing from Yamaguchi’s notebook. The Stokes mortar was a non-functional part of



an antique from the 1930s which Riva had found in a pile of junk outside the Holy See legation. The drawing was a map of Tiananmen Square commissioned by the Beijing Fire Department, to whom Yamaguchi was selling firefighting equipment. The ringleader of the imperialist plot was an American serviceman named David Barrett, who had simply been a neighbour to both men but had moved out a year earlier. 'I never at any time . . . attempted to assassinate or contrive the assassination of anyone,' he protested from Taiwan at the time of the trial. Twenty years later Zhou Enlai, the premier from 1949 onwards, apologised to him and invited him back to China. The whole affair was a fabrication designed to frighten the foreign community and scare local people away from any association with outsiders.<sup>2</sup>

After they had been executed in the capital, Riva and Yamaguchi were quietly buried in the outskirts of the city, on a farm that looked no different from any other, except for wooden markers and a few headstones scattered among broad fields of melons and vegetable marrows. Most of the graves were overgrown with vegetation, but here and there the markers were newer and could still be spotted. This was one of the burial sites for counter-revolutionaries executed at the Bridge of Heaven. Riva's wife, determined that her husband should be buried in a Catholic cemetery, eventually managed to wrestle his body back from the Public Security Bureau. His improvised coffin of thin wood was exhumed and the body placed in a proper coffin. On a clear day with a stark blue sky, the coffin was loaded from the field on to a mule cart and covered with a black cloth marked with a white cross. After a five-hour trek along rutted roads covered in dust, the cart reached the Zhalan Cemetery, shaded by the green foliage of cypresses, pines and poplars. The premises had been given to the Jesuits in 1610 by the Ming emperor Wan Li to receive the body of Matteo Ricci. Here Antonio Riva was finally laid to rest. In the following years the Jesuits would be denounced and expelled. In 1954 the grounds of the cemetery were taken over by the Beijing Communist Party School. For good measure, most of the graves were vandalised during the Cultural Revolution. Only a few remain today, hidden from view.<sup>3</sup>

Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit who arrived in China in 1583 and adopted the language and culture of the country in order to spread the Catholic faith. The first foreigner to receive permission to remain in the imperial capital in 1601, he spent the rest of his life teaching, translating and befriending leading scholars in Beijing. Other missionaries soon followed, but few were allowed to stay in the empire. Foreign traders – Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch,

British – were confined to a small area outside the city walls of Guangzhou after 1757. Only in the wake of the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1858–60 did more substantial foreign communities gain a foothold in the empire, living in concessions under foreign administration in treaty ports such as Shanghai and Tianjin. Foreign residents were subject to the extraterritorial jurisdiction of their own courts. They could buy land and houses in the treaty ports and travel in the interior for business purposes. After the Treaty of Shimonoseki concluded in 1895 they could also build factories and manage workshops.

Some of these ports were transformed into beacons of modernity. In Shanghai, a quiet weaving and fishing town before 1842, a massive urban infrastructure appeared that rivalled the very best internationally, ranging from sewerage systems, port installations, communication networks and insurance facilities to hospitals, banks and schools. First the Russians and later the Japanese developed Dalian, changing it from a small fishing town into a major deep-water port in Manchuria.

Many of the best local enterprises were also established in the concessions, often with foreign partners in order to obtain security of persons and property. The historian Hao Yen-p'ing has written about a 'commercial revolution' at the end of the nineteenth century, as local compradors and foreign entrepreneurs joined forces to pursue new opportunities created by free trade. Bills of exchange eased credit, the money supply grew with Mexican dollars and Chinese paper notes, the volume of trade expanded on international markets and global communications underwent a revolution. Local merchants often dominated these new synergies, financing as much as 70 per cent of all foreign shipping.<sup>4</sup>

But the real boom came after the fall of the Qing empire in 1911. Within less than a decade the number of foreign residents in the Republic of China trebled to well over 350,000. Even as the concessions were retroceded to China – some in 1918, the last few in 1943 – the foreign influx continued. Many lived insular lives, their existence revolving around the expatriate community. But just as many settled and laid down roots in the country. Whether British, French, American or Japanese, entire families could be established in the country for generations: in many cases treaty-port life was home, regardless of whether or not much contact was established with local people. Many settler families had children, and not all of these were sent to boarding school, as English, American, French, German and Japanese schools in China maintained their own national curricula. Many children born of missionary parents or business people grew up in China, some

becoming bilingual and profoundly attached to their adopted country. As the historian John K. Fairbank noted, ‘treaty-port cemeteries are filled with foreigners who understood China well enough to live and die there’.<sup>5</sup>

The government itself was fully aware of the role of foreigners as conduits of cultural and technological transfer. Leaders like Yuan Shikai and Chiang Kai-shek used a stream of experts, including League of Nations technicians, Japanese legal advisers, German army officers, British construction engineers, French postal personnel and American transportation experts. In the first few years of the republic alone, among the most prominent advisers were Ariga Nagao, prominent international jurist; George Padoux, expert on public administration; Henry Carter Adams, standardiser of railway accounts; Henri de Codt, writer on extraterritorial jurisdiction; William Franklin Willoughby, noted political scientist; Frank J. Goodnow, legal adviser; and Banzai Rihachiro, military expert. At less eminent levels, many foreign employees contributed to the country’s modernisation, ranging from engineers, clerks, accountants and lawyers to teachers and translators.<sup>6</sup>

There were also many thousands of missionaries in republican China who were active in religion, medicine and education. Christianity was the country’s third most important faith with close to 4 million followers. Missions were behind several hundred middle schools and thirteen colleges and universities, including Hangchow Christian University, Lingnan University, the University of Nanking, St John’s University, Shanghai University, Shantung Christian University, Soochow University and Yenching University. One reason why missionary activities increased dramatically in the early twentieth century is that so many links were forged with domestic forces of reform, whether in educational reform or public health: “‘Young China’ of the 1910s and 1920s was frequently the product of missionary schools,” writes the historian Albert Feuerwerker, whether they were urban reformers, leading journalists or professional sociologists. Missionaries were also present, as early as 1919, in all but a hundred of the 1,704 counties in China and Manchuria, many speaking the local dialect and living in close contact with the local population.

Over 100,000 European refugees also ended up in China, starting with more than 80,000 White Russians after 1917, followed in the 1930s by some 20,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. They brought with them knowledge, experience and expertise, further enriching the social fabric of republican China.

They ran a whole range of businesses, from beauty parlours to pastry shops and kosher restaurants. Some acquired Chinese citizenship.

The cumulative effect of these waves of immigration was that some of the cities along the coast of China, from Beijing in the north to Guangzhou in the south, were as cosmopolitan as their counterparts in Europe or the United States. Shanghai had a bigger foreign population than any other city except New York.

The first sign that not all foreigners would be welcome under the new regime came from Shenyang, taken over by the People's Liberation Army in October 1948. From the roof of the American consulate, Elden Erickson watched the soldiers marching down the streets. 'I remember there was an old lady that they just shot and went right on. They saw us looking over the top of the building and they started shooting at us.' Acting on advice from Stalin, a few weeks later the communists threw a cordon around the consulate building. The American consul Angus Ward and his staff were held under house arrest for a year, accused of using the consulate as headquarters for espionage. All communications were cut off. 'Passers-by were even arrested for waving greetings,' Ward remembered. Water, light, heating and medicine were denied. Buckets of water had to be carried in as temperatures dropped to 40 below zero. Every day anti-American demonstrators paraded around the building shouting slogans and waving placards. In November 1949, Ward and four other members of his staff were finally arrested and put on trial for 'inciting a riot'. A day after the United States had appealed to thirty nations, including Russia, their sentences were commuted to immediate deportation. By the end of December 1949, after forty hours in an ice-cold carriage with all windows stuck wide open, they reached Tianjin, where they were handed over to American diplomats.<sup>2</sup>

This was far from an isolated incident. As the communists swept through China in 1948–9 they harassed foreigners in general and Americans in particular. In April 1949 soldiers entered the residence of the American ambassador John Leighton Stuart, barging into his bedroom on the second floor where he lay ill. 'Who are you?' the envoy asked. Stuart was one of the few foreigners to have stayed behind in Nanjing, hopeful of reaching an understanding with the communist party. Born in Hangzhou in 1876 to Presbyterian missionary parents, he was more fluent in Mandarin than in English. He had spent his entire career in China, in 1919 becoming the first president of Yenching University. A few months later Mao Zedong published a sarcastic editorial, 'Farewell, John Leighton Stuart', denouncing him as a 'loyal agent of US cultural aggression in China'.<sup>3</sup>

But for most foreigners the exodus started even before liberation. Many read the signs and packed their bags before it was too late. Israel evacuated several ships of Jewish refugees from Shanghai as early as 1948. Yet even as the People's Liberation Army was massed outside Beijing and Tianjin, most governments advised only those without major commitments to leave while adequate transportation was still available. 'It's all most people talked about, whether at work, at home or at parties – to leave or not to leave,' a former British resident of Shanghai recalled. The United States was the first country to order the wholesale evacuation of all its nationals. On 13 November 1948, half a year before the communists had even reached Nanjing, Ambassador Leighton Stuart advised his secretary of state that 'emergency evacuation procedures for practically all of China' had become imperative. US naval forces in the western Pacific helped to transport thousands of Americans and other foreign nationals.<sup>2</sup>

The decision sent shockwaves through the foreign community. Other countries followed suit. The Philippines, for instance, sent a converted tank-landing ship to evacuate a motley crowd of itinerant musicians and their families. Manila also generously accepted 6,000 White Russians who had come to China to escape the Soviet state and had few illusions about the nature of communism. But the British continued to play down the risks of social disorder and advocated 'standing fast for the time being'. They were jolted in April 1949, when the *Amethyst* was shelled and trapped for ten weeks. 'One by one people are making up their minds to leave,' wrote Eleanor Beck, a United Nations employee, a week after the Royal Navy frigate ran aground.<sup>10</sup>

But many decided to wait and see, reluctant to abandon their homes, jobs and personal possessions. The longer they wavered, the more they stood to lose in a rapidly falling market, as newspapers filled up with advertisements for houses, cars, refrigerators and other household goods.<sup>11</sup>

At first all had seemed well. Many foreigners heaved a sigh of relief as they emerged from liberation with barely a scratch. The communists repeatedly guaranteed the protection of foreign nationals and their property, and they seemed equal to their word during the takeover of the country. There were no riots or looting. Some foreigners wrote enthusiastically about how courteous groups of soldiers occasionally borrowed household goods only promptly to return them, in stark contrast to the thuggish behaviour of nationalist soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

But the official hostility was unmistakable, as was the vitriolic propaganda in the press endlessly attacking every perceived slight and injustice

of the past. Every reminder of imperialism, whether real or imagined, seemed to rankle, with the result that every trace of foreign involvement in the economy, religion, education and culture was considered incompatible with the goals of a new China – from missionary schools, democratic institutions, international banks and foreign films down to legal language and street signs in English. Soon even the continued use of English on electricity bills in Shanghai was stridently denounced as betraying ‘a strong sense of colonial influence’. When one foreigner turned up at the Telegraph Office with a query about sending a radiogram, an official thrust a cardboard sign stating ‘Speak Chinese Only’ in his face. His colleagues laughed loudly and puffed out their chests.<sup>13</sup>

‘Those who had long been humiliated now took every opportunity to humiliate,’ writes the historian Beverley Hooper. Foreigners became vulnerable, as even minor transgressions were blown up in the media as perennial symbols of imperialist aggression. One of the most notorious cases involved the vice-consul William Olive, a slight, unassuming young man who was detained for three days on rations of bread and water in Shanghai for driving along a street that had been closed for a victory parade on 6 July 1949. He was brutally beaten, denied medical treatment and forced to sign several confessions. The local press widely exploited the case to portray the communists as liberators of Shanghai from imperialist oppression. ‘All is not well with imperialism,’ trumpeted an evening newspaper on 12 July 1949 in short poetic verses:

When the tables are turned,  
We Chinese have no further need for you knaves.  
Imperialists beware,  
All is not well with you any more.<sup>14</sup>

There were countless incidents involving foreigners, some petty and niggling, others sparking international condemnation. Foreign consulates were officially ignored and subjected to minor indignities and annoyances. Foreign correspondents were banned or censored. Various restrictions were placed on the movements of foreigners. Soon the entire foreign population was required to register with a local Bureau for Public Security. As one foreign student reported from Beijing in July 1949: ‘The procedure is long and onerous. It involves several visits, the writing of quadruplicate answers in Chinese to a fairly detailed questionnaire (rejected if answers are incomplete or wrong), and submission of six photos. The climax is a personal interview, lasting anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour, at which all

answers are recorded.’ Some of the interviewers were former government employees from the nationalist regime, but in the corner, taking no part in the procedures, sat a cadre. Then came house calls by security personnel. ‘It wasn’t unusual to find party officials sitting in the living room,’ recalled an employee of Jardine Matheson. ‘They’d want to know your whole life history.’<sup>15</sup>

Less than two months after liberation, many foreigners decided that they had seen enough. In September 1949 a relief ship was allowed into Shanghai and evacuated 1,220 passengers of thirty-four nationalities. Each had to apply for an exit visa, a cumbersome process which took several days. ‘I have never been so thankful for anything in my life as I am to be here,’ wrote Eleanor Beck in her diary as the *General Gordon* sailed down the Whampoa River. ‘Don’t let anyone fool you about communism.’ ‘Fare thee well, passengers of the *Gordon*,’ declared one newspaper triumphantly.<sup>16</sup>

And still some foreigners gritted their teeth and resolved to carry on. In 1950 extortionate taxes ruined the foreign community’s cultural and charitable organisations. Hospitals, schools and churches were taxed out of existence, while once prosperous social clubs went bankrupt. Foreign enterprises were squeezed to the limit. Assertive employees, their class hatred fired up by labour unions, exacerbated the situation by demanding massive pay rises and shorter working hours. When the foreign owners could no longer bear the costs, their enterprises were acquired without expropriation and resultant compensation claims. Again the *General Gordon* went to pick up hundreds of dispirited foreigners, this time in Tianjin.<sup>17</sup>

The campaign of mistreatment reached its highest pitch in the months following China’s entry into the Korean War in October 1950. A few months later, on 16 December 1950, the US Department of State ordered a freeze on all the tangible and intangible assets in the United States of residents of China. The People’s Republic reciprocated by freezing all American assets, taken over by Military Control Commissions. In the following months foreigners, Americans in particular, were denounced as so many spies and agents gathering information for the imperialist camp, whether they were students, missionaries, entrepreneurs or diplomats. By March 1951, dozens of American nationals lingered in prison on baseless charges, held incommunicado, sometimes without any charges being brought at all. Funds deposited by the remaining churches, schools, hospitals and charitable organisations were frozen. Before long all American enterprises throughout China were under government control. Workers, according to



the Chinese press, celebrated the occasion ‘with the discharge of fireworks and the display of flags and bunting’.<sup>18</sup>

Other nationals were also persecuted. Exit visas were withheld for months on end until every asset had been voluntarily surrendered. Bill Sewell, a university lecturer in Chengdu, Sichuan, explained:

Intent to leave the country had also to be advertised in the local press: and from old servants and others arose endless claims which had to be investigated and settled, increasing the delay. The cadres had to make sure that no university property was mixed with private possessions, so that all baggage had to be listed and every item repeatedly checked. Some thought that bloody-mindedness was carefully cultivated by many officials. Further to add to the difficulties many foreigners were finding ready money hard to obtain. Anxiety, mixed now with anger, now with depression, haunted those who helplessly waited for the signal to depart.<sup>19</sup>

Once they were allowed to leave, stringent regulations limited the amount of personal belongings that could be taken abroad: no automobiles, no bicycles, nothing made of bronze, silver or gold and a very limited number of carpets, scrolls, shades and other objects. Only one piece of jewellery or one watch per person was permitted. Personal papers looked suspicious and were prone to be confiscated – if they were not interpreted as classified information. Many left the clutter of a lifetime behind, departing with a mere suitcase of clothes. Liliane Willens, born in Shanghai to Russian Jewish parents who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution, had to present her photo and stamp albums for inspection. The examiner meticulously removed a photo of her and her sister, still children, sitting on each side of their amah, who was wearing a white jacket and black trousers. Apparently her clothing was an unacceptable sign of imperialist exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

Some were stopped even with an exit permit. When Godfrey Moyle, who had worked at the insurance department of Jardines, turned up at the border in Tianjin in June 1951, an official took his passport, slowly read it, looked at him again, and then without a word tore the document into shreds. The official shouted one word: ‘Cancelled!’ Moyle was speechless. ‘I couldn’t get one word out, not a word would come.’ He was never told why his permission to leave had been revoked, and had to wait a further two years for a new document.<sup>21</sup>

But departure could be a much more protracted affair for many business owners. The communists rejected the principle of limited liability and held whoever appeared to be in charge personally responsible for the discharge of a company’s obligations – shareholders, office managers, accountants, sometimes even custodians. Leading entrepreneurs and industrialists who

could no longer meet the extravagant claims from tax collectors and labour unions were routinely sent to prison until the appropriate sum of money had been secured or wired from abroad. H. H. Lennox, the manager of the Shanghai and Hongkew Wharf Company, which became insolvent in 1950 as a result of the blockade and shortage of shipping, was put behind bars for his inability to pay the workers their annual bonus. 'Here he found himself with some 40-odd Chinese also under temporary detention. Apart from some sandwiches he had with him and a narrow bench around the room there were no amenities whatever in this place.'<sup>22</sup>

Fiscal policy was made retroactive, meaning that it applied not only to current assets and profits of foreign businesses but also to past activities. Employing close scrutiny of account books and forcibly obtained testimonies, local cadres invariably found some reason to recover what they believed the regime was entitled to. Much of this was achieved through tight control of all banks. The Bank of China was taken over by the regime and started acting like a chief comptroller, it alone being authorised to provide credits for foreign trade. Banking operations were reduced to a minimum along the once famous Bund of Shanghai.

The law offered little recourse, since it was vigorously suppressed as an instrument of imperialist exploitation. Lawyers were prohibited from even setting foot in the courts, where judicial proceedings were determined by a presiding judge loyal to the party. Many prominent members of the bar in Shanghai who had acted as legal advisers to foreign firms were never heard of again. All existing codes, including civil and criminal, were suspended.<sup>23</sup>

Foreigners were also persuaded to part with their homes. The technique was always the same: predatory land and house property taxes and very heavy cumulative fines for failure to pay on due dates, combined with the fact that property could no longer be sold on reasonable terms, meant that most people preferred tacitly to let the ownership interest lapse. And once foreigners faced the threat of an exit visa being deferred for ever, they were often keen to hand over their assets to the People's Government.<sup>24</sup>

For instance, in Beidaihe, a luxury resort with rocky headlands and sandy beaches, hundreds of foreign organisations such as embassies and missions owned beautifully designed houses overlooking the Bohai Gulf. After English railway engineers had linked the fishing village to Tianjin and Beijing in the late nineteenth century, Beidaihe rapidly became a popular destination for wealthy elites and foreign diplomats seeking shelter from the summer heat. The Second World War and the civil war forced many to leave China without being able to sell. By September 1952 the only foreigner left

was a certain Mr Baldwin, who led 'a tranquil but rather melancholy life', fishing for bass and cultivating his fruit trees. Most of the properties had been converted into Rest and Recuperation Centres for party officials. After Mao had written a poem about the resort in 1954 it became a favourite retreat for the party leadership.<sup>25</sup>

On 25 July 1951 came a sweep of all foreigners, part of the build-up towards the public execution of Antonio Riva and Ruichi Yamaguchi. In Beijing the police handcuffed and hauled away dozens of priests, nuns, students, professors, merchants and doctors of different nationalities. Many vanished without trace, as foreigners by now led isolated lives cut off from the outside world. Harriet Mills, the daughter of Presbyterian parents who was researching the essayist and writer Lu Xun on a Fulbright Fellowship, spent nearly two years in chains for possessing an ex-army wireless set and for having been in touch with Yamaguchi. Allyn and Adele Rickett, also Fulbright Fellows, were arrested the same evening as they were having dinner with Harriet Mills. They too spent several years in prison, subjected so often to thought-reform sessions that they themselves ended up believing that they were spies.<sup>26</sup>

On 2 August 1951, Beijing secretly passed a new resolution ordering the expulsion of all foreigners except for those under arrest. By the end of the summer the foreign community had no illusions left. The only place where foreigners could still be seen in significant numbers was Tianjin. The once thriving port of northern China had become the only official exit for foreigners leaving the country. Even residents of Shanghai now first had to take a train to Tianjin before boarding a ship. The city was crowded with people waiting for transportation. Once glamorous hotels stood as forlorn remnants of decayed glory, their rooms occupied by a few anxious foreigners. In one of these, an abandoned red-and-gold ballroom led to a smaller dining room with dying flowers on the tables. Strips of paper that had been glued on the windows as a precaution against air raids during the civil war had not yet been removed.<sup>27</sup>

Shanghai had been emptied of its foreign population by the end of 1951. In Beijing too, a once thriving foreign community was broken and destroyed. When thirty-six people convened for Christmas dinner at the British embassy, the gathering included not only all diplomatic staff, but the entire British community in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Two years later came the turn of other foreign population groups. First some 25,000 Japanese held since the end of the war were repatriated. Then came 12,000 White Russians. Many were reduced to complete destitution

and ‘died as a result of the bitter cold, hunger and sickness’. Their mass expulsion started at the end of the year.<sup>29</sup>

In 1926 an ominous shadow was cast over the Christian churches during the unrest in the Hunanese countryside. Thrilled by the revolutionary violence, a young Mao Zedong reported how local pastors were paraded through the streets, churches looted and foreign missionaries silenced. Although the unrest soon abated, foreign missionaries continued to be targets in communist-controlled areas in the 1930s and early 1940s. During the civil war, advancing communist troops confiscated church property, closed down mission schools and persecuted or killed dozens of local and foreign believers.

In July 1947 guerrilla fighters seized a Trappist monastery in Yangjiaping, a remote valley north of Beijing, burning down the cloister and interrogating, torturing and sequestering its resident monks. In January 1948, in the middle of the winter, six of the monks were handcuffed, chained and escorted on to a makeshift platform, their white habits infested with lice and encrusted with blood. A frenzied crowd surged forward as the victims were jostled to their knees. A local cadre read out the verdict: death, to be carried out immediately. One by one, as the shots rang out, they collapsed next to each other. ‘Their lifeless bodies were dragged to a nearby sewage ditch and dumped into a heap, one on top of the other.’ A few months later twenty-seven other monks, most but not all local, had died of maltreatment. Nobody knows how many Protestant and Catholic missionaries were killed in China between 1946 and 1948, but estimates range up to a hundred.<sup>30</sup>

Half of the more than 4,000 Protestant missionaries evacuated their stations before liberation. Some had spent years of internment in Japanese concentration camps and were wary of the communists. Others left due to poor health and old age. But well over 3,000 Roman Catholic missionaries were ordered to stay at their posts. Missionaries held extremely diverse views, from the austere and solitary Trappists who eschewed material possessions and avoided all idle talk to the more reform-minded members of the YMCA, involved in welfare activities in the cities. Hopes of working alongside the communists sustained a few. Others viewed any such co-operation as ‘compromising with the Devil’.<sup>31</sup>

For about a year the decision to remain in China seemed justified. Foreigners were registered, schools infiltrated, hospitals inspected, religion denounced and Christians interrogated, although many missionaries remained optimistic. Nevertheless the signs were not good, even though the pressures were far from uniform. ‘The coils are tightening daily,’ noted Bishop John

O'Shea half a year after the communists entered his diocese in south Jiangxi. Like other foreigners, missionaries were subjected to all sorts of restrictions. Some became virtual prisoners in their own missions, forbidden to leave the compound. And increasingly the communists took over these buildings for quartering military troops, storing grain or holding public meetings, step by step squeezing many missionaries out of their premises.<sup>32</sup>

Economic pressures were also applied in the form of rent, taxes and fines, an experience missionaries shared with other foreigners. The government was 'taxing them on a ruinous scale', wrote the Vatican of its missions in mid-1950. One by one they had to close their doors.<sup>33</sup>

Then came the Korean War. A month after China had entered the conflict in October 1950, arrests of foreign missionaries began. In mass trials and frenzied demonstrations they were accused of espionage and subversive activity. Protestant missionaries left in droves. By the end of 1951 no more than a hundred remained in China.<sup>34</sup>

But the Roman Catholics, who received their orders from the Vatican, were enjoined by the apostolic delegate, Antonio Riberi, to resist at all costs. Despite the trials, parades and denunciations, over 2,000 missionaries kept their ranks closed to any form of official infiltration. The arrest of the Italian bishop Tarcisio Martina in September 1950 for involvement in the plot to kill Mao Zedong was used as a pretext to banish the Holy See from China. Even before Martina had been thrown in gaol for life, Riberi was placed under house arrest, subjected to nightly visits and frequent interrogations by the police for several months. In September 1951 he was expelled for 'espionage activities'. Communist soldiers escorted him from Nanjing to the Hong Kong border. Throughout the journey vociferous campaigns were organised, with loudspeakers placed at street corners and railway stations, in hotels and restaurants – all blaring out propaganda denouncing the papal delegate as a 'lackey of foreign imperialism'.<sup>35</sup>

Mao himself was intrigued by the Vatican, especially its ability to command allegiance across national boundaries. The tenacity of the Catholics perturbed him. But even more suspect was the Legion of Mary, known in Chinese as the 'Army of Mary' (*Shengmujun*), prompting the communists to fear that it might be a military formation. Many of their members, threatened with imprisonment, steadfastly refused to sign confessions renouncing alleged 'counter-revolutionary' activities. On 14 August 1951 the Public Security Bureau ordered the organisation to be destroyed 'within a year'.<sup>36</sup>

Two days after Riberi had been paraded in Shanghai on his way to Hong Kong, a squad of eleven police officers with sub-machine guns arrested Aedan McGrath, the envoy of the Legion of Mary. Before McGrath was locked up, his watch, rosary beads and religious medals were confiscated. The laces of his shoes and the buttons on his trousers were removed. He was forced to stand naked for hours on end. Several months later he was transferred to Ward Road Prison, a solid gaol built by the British in 1901 where his cell had no bed, no chair, no window, nothing at all except a bucket. Food was slopped into a flthy square tin and passed through the bars twice a day. He endured countless interrogations, accompanied by sleep deprivation and naked exposure to the biting cold of winter. After thirty-two months he was finally brought before a tribunal where his crimes were read out to him. Two days later he was released, escorted on to a train and expelled from China.<sup>37</sup>

Others were not so lucky. In December 1951 the sixty-year-old Francis Xavier Ford of the Maryknoll Society, an American Roman Catholic bishop, was accused of ‘espionage’ and ‘possession of weapons’. He was never brought to trial. He was paraded in some of the villages where he had done mission work since 1918, his neck bound with a wet rope that almost choked him as it dried and shrank. The mob beat him with sticks and stones till he was knocked to the ground. He died in prison and was buried on the outskirts of Guangzhou.<sup>38</sup>

In many cases entire groups of missionaries were arrested in carefully targeted raids. In Qingdao, Shandong, twenty-seven brothers of the Society of the Divine Word were rounded up on 3 August 1951, sent to gaol and expelled two years later. While the missionaries were under investigation, the police carried off their chalices, vestments and other sacred objects. Cemeteries were desecrated, graves opened, altars removed, floors dug up and pillars demolished in the search for hidden weapons and radio transmitters. When nothing was found, pieces of junk, from bits of wire to old rosaries, were collected and presented as evidence of radio equipment. Medicine was called poison. The paranoia was contagious, as some missionaries began losing their bearings after months of harsh imprisonment, ceaseless interrogations and outlandish accusations. In Lanzhou, Father Paul Mueller refused to eat, thinking his food was poisoned, and claimed the guards used death rays against him. He died of an untreated infection in prison.<sup>39</sup>

Even those who left of their own accord were harassed. When Adolph Buch, a French priest who began his career as a Vincentian missionary in China in 1906, decided to pack his bags and leave in October 1952, he

took with him a collection of butterflies he had gathered in his spare time over the years. They were confiscated by customs officials. ‘They accused me of wanting to send my collection to the States, to be sent back laden with germs.’ When the eighty-seven-year-old man shuffled across the Lowu Bridge into Hong Kong, he also came without his hearing aid, as it was illegal to take any mechanical devices out of the country.<sup>40</sup>

But many allegations were far more sinister. As the regime liquidated hundreds of mission hospitals, some of the foreigners in charge were accused of mistreatment and arrested on trumped-up charges. After a dying woman had been brought to the Luoyang Catholic Hospital, her husband begged the doctor to operate, despite repeated warnings that the operation had little chance of success. Weeks later local cadres pressured the man to bring charges against Father Zotti, the director of the hospital, who was sentenced to one year in prison and a further year under house arrest. Many similar cases followed.<sup>41</sup>

Wild accusations of wilful murder also accompanied the seizure of over 250 missionary orphanages. After liberation, relatives or strangers brought severely ill children to these homes. The sisters in charge could not save all of them. In December 1951 five nuns were paraded through jeering crowds in the streets of Guangzhou, accused of having murdered over 2,116 children in their care. The court proceedings, held in the red-walled Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, were broadcast for hours on end in five languages. Then the shrill, emotional voice of the prosecutor read the indictment, including charges of inhuman treatment and illegal sale of children. In between inflammatory speeches, several witnesses were brought forward, including children sobbing into the microphones, their words lost in tears and shouts from the crowd. At the climax of the show trial, two of the nuns were condemned to prison, the others to immediate expulsion from China.<sup>42</sup>

A week later two French nuns and a priest were beaten with sticks as they were forced to dig up the decomposing bodies of babies they were alleged to have killed in another orphanage. The excavation went on for twelve hours a day for twelve days, armed guards making sure that they worked without respite. Further up north, in Nanjing, the Sacred Heart Home for Children had earlier been labelled a ‘Little Buchenwald’, its sisters also accused of deliberately neglecting, starving, torturing children and selling them into slavery. Similar incidents, all carefully orchestrated, also occurred in Beijing, Tianjin and Fuzhou.<sup>43</sup>

By the end of 1952 dozens of foreign missionaries languished in prison, many with their hands and feet in chains. Close to 400 were officially ex-



pelled that year, while various forms of pressure forced over 1,000 more to leave. A further purge of any remaining church influence came in the summer of 1953. A year later all but one Protestant missionary had left the country. A further fifteen were detained and about to be expelled. Three hundred Catholic missionaries were still in China. Seventeen of these were in prison, sixty were under interrogation and thirty-four were on their way out of China. The others would soon follow.<sup>44</sup>

Even before the People's Republic had been formally established, the Soviet Union was everywhere. 'Pictures of Soviet leaders are almost as prominent in public places in Peiping [Beijing] as those of Chinese communist leaders,' reported Doak Barnett in September 1949. Russian and Chinese flags flew side by side on landmark buildings. Sino-Soviet Friendship Associations opened with great fanfare in all major cities. Streets were named after the Soviet Union. The main road in Harbin was called Red Army Street, while people walked through Stalin Avenue in the middle of Changchun. In Shenyang visitors were greeted with the view of an enormous granite-mounted Red Army tank in honour of the Russians who had liberated Manchuria from Japanese imperialism. Translated Soviet literature appeared in bookshops, railway stations, schools and factories. Some were textbooks for the Chinese Communist Party. Newspapers and radio went to great lengths to pledge allegiance to the Soviet Union, follow Moscow on foreign policy and praise Stalin as the leader of the socialist camp. In Beijing a gigantic Soviet exhibition was staged 'to introduce systematically the great socialist construction of the USSR'.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet presence expanded dramatically after Mao's statement on 30 June 1949, the anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, that China should 'lean to one side'. 'The twenty-eight years' experience of the Communist Party', he declared, 'have taught us to lean to one side, and we are firmly convinced that in order to win victory and consolidate it we must lean to one side.' Between the side of imperialism and the side of socialism there was no third road. Neutrality was camouflage. Mao had a word for those who believed that China should approach Washington and London in search of foreign loans: his word was 'naive'. 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is our best teacher and we must learn from it.' As *Time* commented a few weeks later, 'In this statement was just about all the world needed to know about the past, present and future attitudes of the Chinese Communist Party.' That same month Liu Shaoqi, Mao's dour second-in-command, was sent to the Soviet Union to hold meetings with top ministers

and visit a whole range of institutions. He saw Stalin on six occasions. After two months he returned to China with hundreds of advisers, some of them travelling on his train.<sup>46</sup>

For the previous twenty-eight years the Chinese Communist Party had depended on Moscow for financial support and ideological guidance. From the age of twenty-seven, when a Comintern agent handed him his first cash payment of 200 yuan to cover the cost of travelling to the founding meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, Russian funds transformed Mao's life. He had no qualms about taking the money, and used Moscow's support to lead a ragged band of guerrilla fighters to ultimate power. The relationship had its ups and downs. There were endless reprimands from Moscow, expulsions from office and battles over party policy with Soviet advisers. Stalin constantly forced Mao back into the arms of his sworn enemy Chiang Kai-shek. Moscow openly favoured Nanjing, even after the nationalists had presided over a bloody massacre of communists in Shanghai in 1927. For the best part of a decade, Chiang's troops relentlessly hounded an embattled Mao, forcing the communists to find refuge in a mountain base and then to traverse some 12,500 kilometres towards the north in a retreat later known as the Long March. But even the Long March was funded by Moscow, as the Comintern contributed millions of Mexican silver dollars. Without these funds the communists would not have got very far.<sup>47</sup>

At the end of the Second World War, Stalin, always the hard pragmatist, signed a treaty of alliance with the nationalists. But he also secretly helped Mao, handing over Manchuria to the communists in 1946. During the civil war Stalin stayed on the sidelines, warning Mao to beware the United States, which supported Chiang Kai-shek, now recognised as a world leader in the fight against Japan.

Even when victory seemed inevitable in 1949, Stalin remained suspicious of Mao. Prone to discerning enemies everywhere, Stalin wondered whether Mao might emulate Tito, the Yugoslav leader who had been cast out of the communist camp for his opposition to Moscow. Stalin trusted no one, least of all a potential rival who in all probability harboured a long list of grievances. Aware of the need to earn his master's recognition, Mao spared no effort vociferously to condemn Tito. 'Stalin suspected that ours was a victory of the Tito type, and in 1949 and 1950 the pressure on us was very strong indeed,' Mao later recollected. In a show of adulation, he tried to present himself and his party as true communists and sincere students of the Soviet Union, worthy of its assistance.<sup>48</sup>

Despite his allegiance to Stalin, Mao resented the way he had been treated by Moscow in the past. But he had nowhere else to turn to for support. In 1949 his regime desperately needed international recognition as well as economic help to rebuild the war-torn country. Mao first declared the policy of 'leaning to one side' and then sought an audience with Stalin. Several requests were rebuffed. Then, in December 1949, Mao was finally asked to come to Moscow.

Fearful of enemy attacks, Mao travelled in an armoured car with sentries posted every hundred metres along the railway lines. Even before he crossed the border he was irked by Gao Gang, the man in charge of Manchuria. Rumours had it that portraits of Stalin were more common in the region than those of the Chairman himself. Months earlier Gao had visited Moscow and signed a trade agreement with Stalin. When Mao realised that Gao was sending gifts to Stalin in a carriage attached to the Moscow-bound train, he had it uncoupled and returned the tribute.<sup>49</sup>

This was Mao's first trip abroad, and he was visibly nervous, pouring with sweat as he stalked up and down the platform in Sverdlovsk during the long train journey. In Moscow the Chairman was given the cold shoulder. Mao expected to be welcomed as the leader of a great revolution that had brought a quarter of humanity into the communist orbit, but within the Soviet sphere for several months now a shroud of silence had been placed over the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Vyacheslav Molotov and Nikolai Bulganin, two of Stalin's henchmen, greeted Mao at Yaroslavsky Station but did not accompany him to his residence. The Chairman gave a speech at the railway terminal, reminding his audience how the unequal treaties between Tsarist Russia and China had been abolished after the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917, a broad hint referring to the treaty signed between the nationalists and the Soviet Union five years earlier as a result of the Yalta accords. Stalin granted Mao a brief interview that day, flattering and praising him for his success in Asia, but also teasing him by feigning ignorance of the real reason for his visit. Five days later, Mao was treated as a guest of honour among many other delegates who had travelled to Moscow to celebrate Stalin's seventieth birthday.<sup>50</sup>

But then Mao was whisked off to a dacha outside the capital and made to wait several weeks for a formal audience. Meetings were cancelled, phone calls never returned. Mao lost patience, ranting about how he was in Moscow to do more than 'eat and shit'. Stalin was wearing down his guest, insisting that the Yalta accords were binding – including Soviet control over

the ports of Port Arthur and Dalian as well as the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria.

Zhou Enlai came to the rescue, but even with his diplomatic skills it took another six weeks to reach an agreement. Russia insisted on keeping all the concessions that the nationalists had been forced to make at the end of the Second World War. Anastas Mikoyan and Andrey Vyshinsky were brutal negotiators, laying down their conditions in blunt terms. While they agreed to return the ports and the railway by the end of 1952, they insisted that their troops and equipment be allowed to move freely between the Soviet Union and Manchuria as well as Xinjiang. Mao was also quickly disabused about Mongolia, which he viewed as just another part of the Qing empire to be reclaimed by the People's Republic of China. The independence of Mongolia, arranged by Stalin and accepted by Chiang Kai-shek in 1945, was beyond debate. Zhou also had to concede exclusive rights on economic activity in Xinjiang and Manchuria. Rights to mineral deposits in Xinjiang were granted for fourteen years. Mikoyan repeatedly badgered Zhou for ever higher quantities of tin, lead, wolfram and antimony, all to be delivered by the hundreds of tonnes a year to the Soviet Union. When Zhou meekly countered that China did not have the means to extract such large amounts of special metals, Mikoyan cut him off by offering help: 'Just say what and when.'<sup>51</sup>

On 14 February the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was finally signed, but all Mao obtained was \$300 million in military aid over five years. For this modest sum Mao had to throw in major territorial concessions, so heavily reminiscent of the unequal treaties concluded with foreign powers in the nineteenth century that they were contained in secret annexes. China also agreed to pay thousands of Soviet advisers and technicians high salaries in gold, dollars or pounds. As the historian Paul Wingrove notes, 'Mao's victorious, independent, revolutionary state was being treated in much the same way as the captive territories of Eastern Europe, from which the Soviet Union also extracted the standard tariff in exchange for services of "experts".' And in an echo of the extraterritorial rights that had been abolished under Chiang Kai-shek in 1943, none of the Russians would be subject to Chinese law. Mao's hands were tied. China was weak and needed a strong protector as international positions were hardening in an unfolding Cold War. The treaty provided just that, extending the Soviet Union's protection in the event of aggression by Japan or its allies, in particular the United States. But despite all the fanfare around the treaty, Mao and Zhou must have left Moscow feeling aggrieved at how they had been treated.<sup>52</sup>

New foreigners started arriving in 1950, flocking to Beijing, Shanghai and other cities by the hundreds, some with their families, others on their own. These were the Russian advisers and technicians. At first they formed new communities in the old concessions, but soon they dominated the foreign scene. In Shanghai they were concentrated in a special compound in the city's most luxurious suburb, several kilometres west of town. A beautiful, unspoilt area with landscaped parks and opulent villas where foreigners shot duck, played golf and strolled along the creeks, the garden city of Hongqiao was soon requisitioned by the military. Foreigners were expelled, Russians moved in. Residents in the area were given twenty-four hours' notice of the requisitioning of their property and ordered to move out. 'Those who objected were forcibly evicted, and their furniture was carried out and placed in trucks.' Technicians, pilots, fitters and others working at the airport, built in the area in 1907, occupied the vacant properties. Sentinels guarded the compound day and night. A bamboo fence went up, tall and solid. Locals soon referred to the area as the Russian Concession.<sup>53</sup>

In every major city Russian advisers were isolated from the local population and quartered in closely guarded compounds. In Guangzhou the island of Shameen, where foreign companies and consulates had built stone mansions along the waterfront, became the centre of official life. Russian advisers were billeted in the Canton Club, once an exclusive domain for British members with private gardens, tennis courts and a football field. In Tianjin some took up quarters in the Jubilee Villas on London Road, where armed guards with tommy guns patrolled the entrance. Others stayed in the old Soviet consulate, where the facilities were updated with a three-metre brick wall topped by electrified barbed wire.<sup>54</sup>

Russians were rarely seen, except when they came out on shopping expeditions, sullen-looking, wearing long leather coats, wide-bottomed trousers, leather boots and large-brimmed felt hats. 'When they enter a shop all other customers are asked to leave.' Their very high rate of pay, combined with restrictions on the export of currency, meant that they tended to buy luxury goods that were too expensive for the general population. 'The Soviet experts were seen everywhere in the Shanghai shopping area; they avidly bought up all the American and European watches, pens, cameras and other luxury imports which were still available but which no Chinese could afford,' noted Robert Loh. Soon they were spotted snapping up antique furniture, Oriental carpets, Limoges porcelain and other objets d'art, loaded by the crateful at the airport to be sent back to the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup>

By October 1950, as China was about to enter the Korean War, the Soviet presence included some 150,000 soldiers and civilians. In Port Arthur, where Stalin had a naval base and port privileges, the Russians had an army numbering 60,000. Along the railways linking the port to Vladivostok were another 50,000 troops, most of them railway guards. There were air force units in the north of Manchuria. Everywhere in China batches of uniformed men arrived as army and air force instructors.

But the Soviet reach went well beyond the military. Thousands of civilian technicians helped build roads, bridges, factories and industry all over the country. In the ministries in Beijing, hundreds of them shadowed their local counterparts, coaching them in Soviet ways. The largest group – 127 specialists – was in the Ministry of Higher Education.<sup>56</sup>

The flow went both ways, as one delegation after another visited the Soviet Union. A few were trade missions, but most went to learn the techniques of running a one-party state. Wang Yaoshan and Zhang Xiushan, for instance, spent four months touring the Soviet Union with a large delegation to study political organisation, from the training of urban cadres to the composition of the Central Committee in Beijing. Zhou Yang, vice-minister of culture, headed a team of fifty that inspected every aspect of propaganda, filing no fewer than 1,300 formal questions during their three-month stay, which included six visits to the newspaper *Pravda*. In every domain – from state security, city infrastructure, cadre training, economic construction and ideological work to heavy industry – China was copying the Soviet Union.<sup>57</sup>

Trade with the Soviet Union shot up, a trend accelerated by the Western blockade during the Korean War. As China had limited foreign currency and gold reserves, it also paid for loans through exports. The basic trade pattern was the exchange of credit, capital goods and raw materials for special metals, manufactured goods and foodstuffs. Pork was bartered for cables, soybeans for aluminium, grain for steel rolls. Since the supply of such metals as antimony, tin and tungsten was limited, most Chinese exports to the Soviet Union consisted of agricultural commodities, ranging from fibres, tobacco, grain, soybeans, fresh fruit and edible oils to tinned meat. Soon the vast majority of exports were destined for Moscow.<sup>58</sup>

As ‘Learn from the Soviet Union’ became the motto, cadres and intellectuals studied Stalin’s *The History of the All-Union Communist Party: A Short Course*. It was read like the Bible. Russian became compulsory in schools. One British woman living with her Chinese husband at Xiamen University noted: ‘Training camps and training centres were established and Russian became the first foreign language (actually the only foreign lan-



guage) in all schools at various levels. On the education front every minute detail was copied from the Russians without discrimination, even the lunch hour was pushed back to three in the afternoon in order to ensure the practice of having six classes in succession in the morning.’<sup>59</sup>

The Sino-Soviet Friendship Association – with its 120,000 branches – distributed books, magazines, films, lantern slides and plays, as well as generators, radios, microphones and gramophones to spread the message. Dozens of exhibitions were organised on themes from ‘Soviet Women’ and ‘Soviet Children’ to ‘Construction in the Soviet Union’. Even news in Chinese originated from the Soviet Union, as TASS, the official Soviet news agency, rapidly became the main source of information. As everybody was told again and again, ‘The Soviet Union’s Today is our Tomorrow’.<sup>60</sup>





## War Again

Liberation had come with the promise of peace. In 1949 most of the population had welcomed the People's Liberation Army with a mixture of relief and wariness, hoping that they would be allowed to go about rebuilding their lives, families and businesses after more than a decade of warfare. Mao instead threw his people into a prolonged war in Korea in October 1950.

At the Yalta conference in February 1945, Stalin not only wrangled secret concessions on Manchuria from Roosevelt, but also negotiated over the joint occupation of Korea, which had become a Japanese colony in 1910. The Korean peninsula extends for about 1,000 kilometres southwards of Manchuria, from which it is divided, for the greatest part, by a natural border formed by the Yalu River. In the extreme north-east, not far from Vladivostok, is a border of less than 20 kilometres with the Soviet Union. The Red Army marched into the northern half of the Korean peninsula in August 1945 with almost no resistance, halting at the 38th parallel for the American troops to arrive from the south. The Russians installed Kim Il-sung as the head of their provisional government.

Born in 1912, Kim could barely speak Korean. His family had settled in Manchuria when he was still a young boy. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1931, carrying out guerrilla raids against the Japanese north of Yan'an. In 1940 he was forced to flee across the border into the Soviet Union, where he was retrained by the Red Army, rising through the ranks to become a major by the end of the Second World War.

When he arrived in Pyongyang on 22 August 1945, Kim had been in exile for twenty-six years. He immediately supported Mao, sending tens of thousands of Korean volunteers and wagonloads of military supplies across the border to help the communists fight Chiang Kai-shek in Manchuria. Kim also used Soviet advisers to build up the Korean People's Army. Stalin equipped it with tanks, lorries, artillery and small weapons. But Kim was bound by his protector, unable to send his troops south to attack the American-backed Syngman Rhee

without the permission of the Soviet Union. Kim had to watch in frustration as Mao took over China, bringing a quarter of humanity into the socialist camp while Korea remained partitioned.<sup>1</sup>

Kim pushed repeatedly for an assault on the south, but Stalin was in no rush for an open conflict involving the United States. Yet by the end of 1949 Stalin started to waver. The Americans had not intervened in the Chinese civil war and had all but abandoned Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan. In discussions with Mao, who was in Moscow in late 1949, Stalin suggested moving some of the Korean troops in the People's Liberation Army back across the Yalu River. Mao agreed, and sent over 50,000 veterans back to North Korea. Then, in January 1950, the United States indicated that Korea no longer fell within its defence perimeter in the Pacific. Kim badgered Moscow again on a number of secret trips to Moscow. Stalin now went along with the idea of an assault on the south, but was wary of becoming entangled in a costly adventure. He refused to commit any troops: 'If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger. You have to ask Mao for all the help.' In April Kim went to see Mao.<sup>2</sup>

Mao, in turn, needed Stalin. He could not invade Taiwan without the requisite sea and air power, which had to come from Moscow. And he could hardly deny the Koreans the opportunity to unify their own country now that most of China stood under one flag. Mao pledged to support Kim with troops if the Americans entered the war.<sup>3</sup>

Military deliveries to North Korea from the Soviet Union jumped dramatically, including tanks and planes. Russian generals took over planning for the attack, setting the date for 25 June 1950. Under the pretext of a border skirmish, a comprehensive air and land invasion with a massive force of North Korean troops was launched. The south was ill prepared, with fewer than 100,000 soldiers. Alarmed at calls for a march north to overthrow the communists, the Americans had deliberately denied Syngman Rhee armour, anti-tank weapons and artillery heavier than 105 mm. His troops crumbled within weeks.<sup>4</sup>

President Truman acted rapidly, warning that appeasement would be a mistake and vowing to repel the North Koreans. On the day of the invasion, the United Nations passed a resolution committing troops to support South Korea. The Soviet Union's ambassador to the United Nations, who had been boycotting proceedings since January over Taiwan, was expected to return to the Security Council and vote against the resolution, but Stalin told him to stay away. Two days later tacit agreement was received from the Soviet Union that American intervention would not lead to an escalation.

Stalin did nothing to prevent Western involvement in the conflict. He alone knew that Mao had made a commitment to sending troops to Korea. Perhaps he hoped that China would destroy large numbers of Americans in the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Truman ordered US troops based in Japan to assist South Korea. Determined to fight global communism, the president obtained \$12 billion from Congress for military expenditure. Soon American soldiers were joined by troops from fifteen UN member nations, including Great Britain and France. In August the tide turned, as the United Nations counter-offensive retaliated with tactical superiority in tanks, artillery and air power. General Douglas MacArthur reached the 38th parallel in October 1950. He could have stopped there, but so confident was he that Mao would never dare to enter the conflict that he decided instead to push all the way to the Yalu River, ignoring the most basic security concerns of the People's Republic.

On 1 October Stalin wired Mao a message asking him for five or six divisions to assist the North Koreans. He suggested that they be called 'volunteers' to maintain the pretence that China was not formally involved in the war. Mao had already moved some of his troops up to the border and the next day he asked them to 'stand by for the order to go into [Korea] at any moment'.<sup>6</sup>

The Chairman spent the following days convincing his senior colleagues to back him. Only Zhou Enlai offered cautious support. Lin Biao, who had won the day in Manchuria during the civil war, feigned illness to turn down command of the troops. The other leaders, including Liu Shaoqi, strongly opposed entering the war, fearing that the United States might bomb the country's cities, destroy its industrial base in Manchuria and even drop atomic bombs on China. Marshal Nie Rongzhen recalled that those who opposed the decision felt that after years of warfare 'it would be better not to fight this war as long as it was not absolutely necessary'. Peng Dehuai only reluctantly agreed to assume command of the offensive after a sleepless night tossing and turning on the floor of his hotel room in Beijing, as the bed was too soft for comfort. 'The tiger always eats people,' he explained, 'and the time when it wants to eat depends on its appetite. It is impossible to make any concessions to a tiger.'<sup>7</sup>

Mao took a huge gamble. He hoped that America would not expand the war to China for fear of provoking the Soviets. He was also convinced that the Americans had no stomach for a prolonged war and would be no match for the millions of soldiers he was prepared to throw into the conflict. He

believed that he would have to fight the Americans at some point, all the more so since Truman had sent the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan at the start of the Korean War. Fighting the imperialists in Korea would be easier than launching an amphibious assault on fortress Taiwan. Most of all, a hostile Korea on the Manchurian frontier would represent a serious security threat to the People's Republic.

There was also quiet rivalry with Stalin. Korea was the arena where Russia and China were competing for dominance over Asia. Stalin was ahead of the game, having so far gone to great lengths to keep the Chinese communists out of North Korea. But once Russia's satellite forces started to disintegrate, Mao was ready to march in from Manchuria, reverse the rout and assume the leadership of the communist camp in Asia.

But Mao sought to extract a price from the Kremlin, and on 10 October 1950 sent Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao to negotiate with Stalin in his Black Sea dacha. Stalin committed ammunition, artillery and tanks, but reneged on an earlier promise to provide air cover, as the planes would not be ready for another two months. Stalin even wired Mao to let him know that China did not have to join the war. But Mao persisted: 'With or without air cover from the Soviet Union,' he replied, 'we go in.' Zhou Enlai buried his head in his hands after he read the cable. On 19 October, hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops surreptitiously began entering North Korea.<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese troops took the United Nations forces by complete surprise. The United States had very little information about what was going on inside China, and most of its covert military presence in the country had collapsed by September 1949. But a report cabled to Washington on 19 October by the military attaché in Hong Kong, based on information provided by Chen Tou-ling, the former general manager of the China Air Transport Corporation, warned that 400,000 troops were massed on the border and primed to cross into Korea. The Dutch Foreign Ministry, using information gathered by its embassy in Beijing, also provided the Americans with detailed intelligence on an imminent invasion of Korea. These warnings were ignored.<sup>9</sup>

So convinced was General MacArthur that China would never enter the fray that when reports came in of PLA troops crossing into Korea, he flew his Douglas C-54 Skymaster over the Yalu River – at considerable risk to his own safety. He saw nothing. The 130,000 troops under Peng Dehuai's command were hard to detect, marching under cover of night without any

of the usual mechanised activity or wireless traffic that could have revealed their presence.

They attacked out of the blue on 25 October, wiping out several South Korean regiments, but retreated into the mountains as suddenly as they had appeared. General MacArthur brushed the incident aside, interpreting these early probes as evidence that the Chinese were few in number and reluctant to fight. On Thanksgiving Day, in bleak and blustery weather, he began a final push to end the war and bring American soldiers 'Home by Christmas'.

The Americans fell into what one historian has called 'the largest ambush in the era of modern warfare'.<sup>10</sup> On 25 November, MacArthur's men were struck by massive numbers of hidden soldiers. Their bugles blaring, drums, rattles and whistles adding to the din, screaming Chinese troops appeared in the middle of the night, shooting and throwing grenades. They instilled sheer terror in the United Nations forces. Wave after wave of ferocious assault groups hurled themselves on to gun positions, trench lines and rear areas. The onslaught almost instantly changed the course of the war, forcing the Americans into a headlong retreat southwards. The communists recovered Kim Il-sung's capital Pyongyang on 7 December.

Without air cover, his supply lines dangerously extended and without adequate provisions of food and ammunition, Peng Dehuai pleaded for a halt along the 38th parallel, but Mao was determined to press on. Seoul, capital of South Korea, was taken during the Chinese New Year in January 1951. By now a devastating blow had been dealt to the United States. Truman declared a State of National Emergency, telling the American public that their homes and nation were 'in great danger'.

Mao's prestige was greatly enhanced, but the cost to his own soldiers was enormous. The fighting took place in extreme weather, with temperatures plummeting to minus 30 degrees Celsius, made worse by freezing winds and deep snow. Most troops had no padded shoes. Some wore thin cotton sandals and a few even went barefoot, wrapping rags around their feet before going into battle. Blankets and jackets were burned out by napalm. Whole units froze to death, while frostbite attacked the hands and feet of many troops. Up to two-thirds of all soldiers also suffered from trench foot, which sometimes resulted in gangrene. Starvation was widespread, as the supply lines were hopelessly stretched and under constant fire from prowling enemy aircraft. In some companies one in six men suffered from night blindness caused by malnutrition. Dysentery, among other diseases, was common, and was treated with opium. After the exhilaration of the first few weeks, morale was low, as the men were physically exhausted by the

work they were made to do. Some were so worn out that they committed suicide.<sup>11</sup>

Soon the troops ran out of steam. They were able to sustain themselves into the early months of 1951 by capturing arms and supplies from the retreating enemy. Soldiers learned to eat C rations. Li Xiu, a propaganda officer, remembered that the soldiers quickly took to American biscuits. 'Without the American sleeping bags and overcoats we captured, I am not sure we could have gone on.'<sup>12</sup>

The tide soon turned. On 26 December 1950, General Matthew Ridgway arrived in Korea to take command of the American forces as MacArthur's subordinate. In the first weeks of 1951 he regrouped the United Nations forces and counter-attacked, first cautiously probing his opponent's determination before launching more robust offensives, creating fields of fire with carefully deployed men and firepower that mauled the Chinese troops. He called his strategy the 'meat grinder', slowly pressing forward with devastating artillery and tanks, shattering the enemy again and again. Mao refused to retreat, wiring orders that his troops counter-attack instead. In the first two weeks of February alone, Ridgway inflicted an estimated 80,000 casualties.<sup>13</sup>

Peng Dehuai rushed back to Beijing in February, confronting Mao in his bunker at Jade Spring Hills over the massive losses caused by reckless warfare. The Chairman listened, but was too enthralled by his own fantasies of victory over the capitalist camp. Peng was told to hold the line and to expect a long war. On 1 March Mao cabled Stalin, proclaiming his determination to wear down the enemy in a protracted war: 'In the last four offensives, we have sustained 100,000 casualties among combatants and non-combatants of the People's Volunteer Army, and we are about to replenish the troops with 120,000 soldiers. We are prepared for another 300,000 casualties in the next two years, and we will furnish another 300,000 troops.'<sup>14</sup>

On the American side, General MacArthur toyed with the idea of using nuclear weapons. He even briefly contemplated invading China, but was sacked by President Truman in April 1951. Ridgway, who replaced him, now assuming overall command of all United Nations forces in Korea, refused to go further than the 38th parallel.

A stalemate emerged in the summer of 1951. Armistice talks began in mid-July, but were broken off by the communists. Stalin slowed down negotiations to bring the war to an end, as he had little to gain from peace. He was keen to see more American troops destroyed in Korea, and probably not unhappy to have a potential rival locked into a costly conflict. But

Mao also repeatedly rejected peace proposals. As he had indicated to Stalin even before a stalemate was reached, he was prepared for the long term. The longer the war lasted the more ammunition, tanks and planes he could badger out of the Soviet Union. The Chairman used the war to expand his army and build up a first-class arms industry, all with Soviet help.<sup>15</sup>

The pretext Mao used to justify dragging his feet at the negotiating table was that the Americans held some 21,000 Chinese prisoners of war, most of whom refused to return to China. Held in camps in South Korea, they tattooed their bodies with anti-communist slogans to prevent forced repatriation. Some wrote letters with their own blood. 'The POWs cut open the tips of their fingers and use them as fountain pens,' a Red Cross delegate reported. 'I saw a number of these letters in question. It is an awesome sight.' Mao demanded the return of every single prisoner of war, and Stalin encouraged him in his hardline position.<sup>16</sup>

So the war lasted another two years. The battle lines barely changed, but the casualties were enormous. Trench warfare forced many soldiers to spend weeks buried inside foxholes, tunnels and shelters from which they could emerge only at night. Bodies, shells and garbage were everywhere, but there was hardly any food or water. Soldiers sometimes drank the moisture that dripped from rocks. Captain Zheng Yanman remembered an attack in October 1952: 'There were about one hundred soldiers inside the tunnels, remnants of six different companies and ranging in age from sixteen to fifty-two. About fifty of the men were wounded, and they had received no medicine or medical assistance. They were lying around, some of them dying, and nobody seemed to care. In one of the shelter holes there was a pile of more than twenty bodies.' Soldiers who deserted were executed on the spot.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the soldiers were former nationalist troops who had surrendered during the civil war. Mao had few qualms in consigning them to their deaths in Korea. In fighting the communists in Xuzhou three years earlier, some of them had been obliged to shoot unarmed villagers, used as human shields by the communists. Now they were made to exhaust the enemy's bullets in one wave after another, as flesh and blood was hurled against modern armament. An American machine-gunner described what happened as he countered headlong night attacks by massed Chinese infantry: 'We could see them tumbling down like bowling pins,' he wrote. 'As long as the flares were up we never had trouble finding a target.'<sup>18</sup>

Stalin's death in March 1953 brought about a quick armistice, but the cost of the stalemate had been prodigious. From July 1951 to the ceasefire on 27



July 1953 millions of soldiers and civilians died. China sent some 3 million men to the front, of whom an estimated 400,000 died. Despite the terrible human cost, Korea was Mao's personal victory. He had pushed for war when his colleagues had wavered. His gamble paid off. China had brought the world's most powerful nation on earth to a standstill. China had stood up.<sup>19</sup>

The war had lasting domestic consequences. The official line on how the conflict had started in June 1950 was that the South Koreans, incited by American imperialists, had attacked the peaceful North Koreans in an act of flagrant aggression. People from all walks of life in China met this explanation with a mixture of disbelief, incomprehension, fear and outright panic. Many could not help but wonder how the campaign launched into the south had proceeded with such efficient military planning and dispatch. In Shanghai students and professors openly asked what the North Koreans were doing in the south. Fears were rife about an impending cataclysm with the United States. Rumours spread like wildfire. In Shenyang, close to the Korean border, talk of the start of a Third World War did the rounds: 'The United States have entered the war, the Third World War has started!' In Nanjing some people were so anxious that they phoned the *People's Daily* to ask if a new world war had begun. Anxiety over war went in tandem with hopes for a return to the old order. 'The Soviet Union has already surrendered unconditionally, now the war criminal Mao Zedong will be arrested!' it was whispered in Manchuria, while others announced the impending collapse of the regime: 'The Americans and Chiang Kai-shek have already recaptured Hainan Island, Lin Biao has been sacrificed!'<sup>20</sup>

The threat of a nuclear conflagration created deep anxiety, which official propaganda on imperialism's impending collapse scarcely dented. In October 1950, as the United Nations troops approached the Yalu River, Mao's grandiose description of American imperialism as nothing more than a paper tiger was quietly mocked in Shanghai. Some opined that if the United States was a paper tiger, China was not even a pussycat.<sup>21</sup>

Fear of an impending invasion reached fever pitch. People worried about bombs being dropped on cities and the enemy entering Manchuria. In Shenyang thousands took to the roads in panic. Over 1,200 workers abandoned their posts at the First of May Factory, while one in five absconded from the Municipal Tool Factory. Teachers, doctors, students, even party members scrambled on to trains to escape south, convinced that the end was

nigh. Those who stayed behind hoarded food, clothes and water. Messages of opposition to the party appeared in schools, factories, offices, hospitals and dormitories, scribbled on walls, etched into the furniture, scrawled even on to kettles in canteens. Some were concise: 'Beat the Soviet Union'. Others were long diatribes against communism.<sup>22</sup>

The party responded with a campaign of terror. But in November 1950 it also tried persuasion through a campaign called 'Resist America, Aid Korea, Preserve our Homes, Defend the Nation'. Mass meetings were held in every school and factory, while propaganda in newspapers, magazines and the radio tried to whip up the population in a furore against the enemy. Not a day went by without some stirring denunciation against the United States in the *People's Daily* or other state-controlled publications. The *South China Daily*, for example, trumpeted its utter contempt for America:

This is a country which is thoroughly reactionary, thoroughly dark, thoroughly corrupt, thoroughly cruel. This is the Eden of a few millionaires, the hell of countless millions of poor people. This is the paradise of gangsters, swindlers, rascals, special agents, fascist germs, speculators, debauchers, and all the dregs of mankind. This is the world's source of all such crimes as reaction, darkness, cruelty, decadence, corruption, debauchery, oppression of man by man, and cannibalism. This is the exhibition ground of all the crimes which can possibly be committed by mankind. This is a living hell ten times, one hundred times, one thousand times worse than any hell that can possibly be depicted by the most gory of writers.<sup>23</sup>

Zhou Enlai himself set the tone, becoming an eloquent spokesman for the Hate America Campaign, and never tiring of denouncing the imperialist plot to enslave the world. Mao Dun, minister of cultural affairs and prominent novelist, announced that 'Americans are veritable devils and cannibals.' Returned students from America were made to publish recantations, including denunciations of bestialism and depravity. Cartoons and posters portrayed President Truman and General MacArthur as serial rapists, bloodthirsty murderers or savage animals. Loudspeakers persistently blared forth the same slogans and speeches. 'Even inside the house with all the windows closed,' noted a Beijing resident, 'you hear the constant, unchanging music and the speeches, and if you open the windows you are nearly deafened by the noise.' Calculated vituperation and genuine outrage were hard to disentangle in these endless tirades, but the message was clear enough: people had to hate, curse and despise the imperialists.<sup>24</sup>

Everything was carefully orchestrated from above. A central directive dated 19 December 1950 specifically ordered that feelings of admiration and respect towards the United States should be changed into 'Hate America, Despise America and Look Down on America'.<sup>25</sup>

This goal was to be accomplished not just by relentless propaganda, but also through renewed study sessions and mass rallies. Many were disorganised. In one Shanghai university, the faculty and the entire student body were given ten minutes to dress and assemble at the campus square one wintry day in 1950. Printed banners were thrust into their hands with messages such as ‘Down with the Soft-Worded, Cloak-and-Dagger Lies of the American Imperialists’ and ‘Protest against Austin’s Shameless Lies’. ‘Everyone was asking what it was all about, but no one seemed to know,’ explained Robert Loh. ‘We were told to shout the slogans printed on the banners. Thereupon we were marched for five hours all through Shanghai.’ Back at the university they were made to listen to a fiery speech from the party secretary. Only then did they understand that they had just participated in a spontaneous demonstration against a speech by Warren Austin, the American representative on the United Nations Security Council. Thereafter they were called out at regular intervals to protest against imperialist lies. ‘We rarely knew what the issue was until we read the story of our “voluntary demonstration” in the papers.’<sup>26</sup>

These were university students, but ordinary people who tried to pursue their own lives in the midst of ferocious campaigns against ‘counter-revolutionaries’, ‘tyrants’, ‘evil gentry’ and ‘landlords’ found the Hate America Campaign even more confusing. In Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, rallies in support of the war took place almost every week in the early spring of 1951, although some of those who marched against America still had no idea what the campaign was all about – despite countless leaflets, speeches and propaganda films. Those who refused to participate were fined or labelled as members of a secret society. Despite these threats, people were apprehensive, as rumours circulated that women who turned up might be sent to Korea to cook meals for the soldiers. In Guangzhou, where patriotic parades of half a million people were held, ignorance was widespread. In one power plant where the local Propaganda Department tested more than a hundred workers on their knowledge, one in six did not know where their ally was and more than a quarter had never heard of Kim Il-sung. Propaganda seemed barely to penetrate parts of the countryside. In one village in Shixing county, sixty women enrolled in a literacy class did not know whether ‘Korea’ was the name of a place or a person.<sup>27</sup>

After the voluntary rallies came the voluntary donations. Money was needed to buy war materials once stalemate was reached in Korea in the summer of 1951. Stalin had finally begun delivering the long-promised planes, but he demanded payment from China for all the military equipment

he sent to Korea. More uniforms, more medicine, more guns, more tanks and more planes were needed, the government explained. Detailed directives with charts outlined the contributions that everyone was expected to make. 'Wealthy individuals' were called upon to donate gold, jewellery, dollars or other foreign currency. Robert Loh soon discovered how much was required. 'The first time I was approached, I voluntarily agreed to contribute the amount of a half month's salary. I learned quickly that this was regarded as insufficient; the collector kept after me until I had pledged three months' salary. I found that the other professors pledged the same amount, but the collectors never once dropped the fiction that our contributions were voluntary.'<sup>28</sup>

Workers were urged to increase production or work overtime without compensation. But the bulk of popular subscriptions fell on the farmers. Here too leaders at every level set the tone, keen to outdo each other in collecting ever larger amounts to demonstrate how determined they were. North-east China proudly announced that 9.3 million yuan had been collected by October 1951. Unwilling to lag behind, Deng Xiaoping, who was responsible for the entire south-west, announced in November 1951 that contributions for the war in Korea were a revolutionary task of great ideological import in which 'no slacking' would be tolerated. Gifts of artillery, tanks and aeroplanes were essential to victory and each man and woman was to donate the equivalent of 2.5 to 4 kilos of grain.<sup>29</sup>

The pressure to collect colossal sums of money from people already heavily taxed was difficult to resist. In parts of Sichuan some government employees were forced to pledge a third of their salary each and every month until the end of the war. Elsewhere three months' salary seemed to be the norm, although some were taxed half a year's pay. But that was not the end of it. In many places schoolchildren were enrolled in the campaign, and they pilfered from their parents. Some bartered away shoes and clothes for a mere fraction of their value, while others rummaged through their homes and pinched scissors, knives, pots and pans, all sold as scrap iron.<sup>30</sup>

Those least able to resist the pressure were farmers, in particular in regions where they were entirely dependent on the party after land reform had been carried out. Just as city people contributed a third of their pay, farmers were sometimes bullied into parting with a third of their crop. In a village in Huarong county, a third of the millet was taken after the harvest as a contribution to the war effort and another third as tax. But many of the poor could not afford donations. In one Sichuan village alone, dozens of farmers stripped naked in a meeting convened to meet the required target in dona-

tions. They were so poor that all they could give were the clothes they were wearing. In other parts of the province, women were forced to shave off their hair as a gift to the party.<sup>31</sup>

Some people were driven to an early grave. In Wangcheng, Hunan, a poor farmer called Dai Fengji was forced to give 14 kilos of millet. 'I am the only one working in my family and eight people depend on me. My wife is sick and needs medicine. Nobody can look after my children. How can I possibly afford that much?' The head of the Peasant Association had a simple answer: 'Dead or alive you will donate.' The farmer jumped into a pond and drowned. Nobody knows how many people were bullied to death, but in Sui county, Hubei, five people committed suicide, unable to cope with the pressure.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the hysteria of the campaign, conducted at a time of terror when a mere hint of disapproval might attract the potentially fatal label of 'counter-revolutionary', some people refused to contribute. When they still persisted after several visits from the authorities, they were sometimes fined the equivalent of what had been expected in the first place. But some forms of pressure were less benign. In parts of Xinjiang people were forced to strip and stand in the glaring sun for hours on end. Some activists went around Nanjing putting up notices on people's doors stating the amounts they were expected to contribute. One man who showed insufficient enthusiasm was dragged on to a platform and taken to task from eight o'clock in the morning until the middle of the night. After he had agreed to contribute 10 yuan for six months, he was bullied again the following day until he increased the total to 300 yuan.<sup>33</sup>

But donations alone could not win a war. The army needed men. At each rally a wave of enthusiastic volunteers signed up, most of them idealistic students from the cities. In Guangzhou alone 13,000 people, many of them still in high school, wanted to go to the front and fight the enemy. Some, like Robert Loh, were suspicious of all the propaganda, but others like Li Zhisui followed the war closely. Then working in a clinic for the country's leaders, Li was thrilled that China was defeating the United States: 'Even as the Korean War dragged on inconclusively, I was proud to be Chinese.' After all, this was 'the first time in more than a century that China had engaged in a war with a foreign power without losing face', as the doctor put it, a view shared by many other intellectuals who were responsive to patriotic propaganda. Li tried to join the army but his superiors told him to stay put.<sup>34</sup>

People in the countryside were less keen, especially in regions where years of forced conscription had left the population war-weary. In Manchuria, right next to Korea, uncounted numbers of young men tried to escape conscription. In Dehui county alone, several thousand went undercover in the cities, even refusing to return home to help their families with the harvest for fear of being caught and sent to the front. When people in Wendeng county, Shandong, heard about conscription, their faces ‘changed expression as if hearing about a tiger’. Young men took to the hills, a few even cutting off some of their fingers in order to avoid the draft. In Daixian, Shanxi, young men were on the run in a third of all the villages.<sup>35</sup>

But, like everyone else, army recruiters had quotas to fill. In Gaoping county, also in Shanxi, they pounced on their targets during fake village meetings, held to lure men out of their homes. The conscripts were locked up at night, although over a hundred still managed to escape. When the county leaders finally decided to keep only those who had genuinely volunteered, of 500 detainees all but a dozen absconded. Sometimes family members were ransomed or locked up to entice the men to enlist. In Yueyang, Hunan, a woman who insisted that conscription should be voluntary was tied up and hung from a beam in front of the assembled villagers as a warning to others.<sup>36</sup>

In the region straddling Henan, Hebei and Shandong, ten counties reported cases of young men leaping into wells in attempts to escape from recruitment. Several hung themselves, two jumped in front of a train. Such acts of desperation seem rather extreme but made sense in the context of the campaign of terror that was unfolding at the same time. As Zhou Changwu, a farmer from Hunan, put it, ‘Under the nationalists we would hide in the mountains during conscription, but now we will be denounced as spies if we go up there and hide: there really is no way out.’<sup>37</sup>

The economic cost of the war was enormous. In 1951 military expenses swallowed up 55 per cent of total government spending. Thanks to the Korean War, the annual budget that year was 75 per cent higher than in 1950.<sup>38</sup>

The mainstay of the regime’s budget was public grain taken from the farmers. Manchuria became the rear base and staging area for the war, with hundreds of thousands of troops moving along the South Manchurian Railway and the Chinese Eastern Railway under Soviet control. Manchuria was China’s breadbasket, producing an agricultural surplus even when the rest of the country suffered from famine. Its industrial heart was a small triangle

formed by Shenyang, Anshan and Fushun, churning out about half of all coal and most of the country's pig iron, steel products and electrical power. Manchuria had arsenals and supply depots for the troops in Korea. Soon it became a haven for the hundreds of planes supplied by Stalin, hovering over the stalemate across the Yalu River.

Villagers in Manchuria came under relentless pressure to contribute grain, cotton and meat for the war effort. The People's Congress noted that at the end of 1950 in many parts of the region the insatiable demands from the army had swept aside the restrictions on procurements designed to protect ordinary people from hunger. By the end of the year, a third of the region had sunk into poverty, as villagers lacked cattle, food, fodder and tools. Some even had too little seed to plant the next crop.<sup>39</sup>

The pressure did not abate over the following two years, as coercion on the ground became the norm. Cadres locked villagers into meetings until they agreed to deliver more grain. They sealed off the mills and entered homes, moving furniture, probing cupboards and lifting floorboards in search of hidden grain. The militia blockaded entire villages, allowing no foodstuffs to enter or leave until the quota had been fulfilled. One in three villagers was starving. In Huaide county people ate wild herbs and soybean cakes, normally used to feed poultry and cattle. Horses were starved until they fell over, and were then eaten, which was considered a sign of extreme deprivation unknown since the civil war. Near Changchun villagers bartered all their belongings, including their clothes, to meet their tax obligations. Some families sold their children. The provincial party committee in Jilin decided that widespread starvation in the province had nothing to do with natural disasters: it was the direct result of the coercion that came with orders to supply more grain.<sup>40</sup>

Further south Sichuan was known as the country's rice basket. As Deng Xiaoping proudly proclaimed his determination that every man and woman should contribute up to 4 kilos of grain in war donations, tens of thousands of people in the county of Ya'an alone were reduced to foraging for roots to eat. In Yunnan, also under Deng's purview, more than a million people were starving, many of the victims stripping the bark off trees or eating mud that filled the stomach but often caused excruciatingly painful death as the soil dried up the colon. But the pressure did not abate. In November 1951, despite ruthless requisitions, Deng Xiaoping announced that farmers in south-west China would be asked to contribute an extra 400,000 tonnes of grain beyond the usual procurements. Six months later 2 million people



were starving in the region, with reports of cannibalism reaching the higher echelons of the leadership.<sup>41</sup>

The war did nothing, either, to help the urban economy. Chapter 3 showed how a recession in the spring of 1950 crippled such once bustling hubs of trade and industry as Shanghai, Wuhan and Guangzhou. Tianjin, the commercial centre in the north, managed to keep afloat. With Shanghai blockaded by the nationalists, much of the export trade was routed through Tianjin, which was beyond Taiwan's reach. But the Korean War brought about trade restrictions imposed by the United States on more than 1,100 commodities, badly hitting private importers and exporters. A full embargo followed in October 1950, leading to a 30 per cent decline in foreign trade in the first half of 1951. The city port was allocated government contracts for war materials, and some of the new state trading companies thrived on the back of the war, but the private sector soon entered a terminal decline.<sup>42</sup>

Beijing put the country on red alert in April 1952, charging that the Americans had secretly been waging germ warfare since the end of January. The enemy had allegedly dropped infected flies, mosquitoes, spiders, ants, bedbugs, lice, fleas, dragonflies and centipedes over parts of North Korea and Manchuria, spreading every variety of contagious diseases. The Americans had also purportedly released contaminated rats, frogs, dead foxes, pork and fish. Even cotton, Beijing warned, could spread plague and cholera. Enemy planes, it was claimed, had deployed these biological weapons in about a thousand sorties, most of them over Manchuria but a few reaching as far south as Qingdao, the port of Shandong province.<sup>43</sup>

Beijing first alleged that the United States was waging germ warfare in February 1952, claims that rapidly made headlines around the world. The charges gained credibility after several captured American pilots confessed to dropping the disease-carrying insects on Korea and China. Even more damaging was an international commission chaired by Joseph Needham, a Cambridge University biochemist, who published a lengthy report corroborating these allegations – after visiting Manchuria and finding one diseased vole.<sup>44</sup>

The regime's propaganda machine went into overdrive, giving renewed impetus to the Hate America Campaign. Endless articles on anthrax-laden chickens or brittle bombs filled with tarantulas appeared in the newspapers, with photos showing clumps of dead flies, close-ups of diseased insects, microscopic images of bacteria and smudges identified as germs. In Beijing there were reports of germ-laden joints of pork, as well as dead fish (forty-

seven of these found on a hilltop), corn stalks, medical goods and confectionery.<sup>45</sup>

A revolving exhibition toured all major cities. In Beijing it filled three large halls, with exhibits of parachuted cylinders allegedly full of germ-carrying insects, and maps indicating where the Americans had dropped biological weapons 804 times at seventy points. In the corner of one room, a loudspeaker broadcast the recorded confessions of two captured enemy pilots over and over again. Their written statements were displayed in a glass case. A series of microscopes revealed bacteria cultures claimed to have been developed from infected insects. One photograph showed three victims of plague who had been infected by flies dropped by enemy planes.<sup>46</sup>

The campaign strongly resonated in China, where the Japanese had conducted experiments in germ warfare during the Second World War. Now that Japan was an ally of the United States, it was easy to imagine that those tests had carried over into the Korean War. Beijing highlighted how scientists from the notorious Unit 731 had been granted immunity after the Second World War in exchange for their expertise – even though the United States denied this at the time and would only reveal the extent of their collaboration with the Japanese scientists decades later. After General MacArthur had openly toyed with the idea of using the atom bomb, the threat of mass destruction seemed all too plausible, lending credibility to the idea of secret biological weapons. In Asia more generally, as Frank Moraes, the editor of the *Times of India*, noted, public opinion was sensitive to the idea that the Americans were using Asians as guinea pigs for another weapon of mass destruction. Li Zhisui, the doctor working for the party leaders, was only one among many intellectuals appalled by the news that the United States was using bacteriological warfare in Korea.<sup>47</sup>

But some observers were less convinced. On 6 April the *New York Times* published an article demonstrating that the photos presented as proof by the *People's Daily* were fraudulent. One scientist who had pored over the evidence pointed out that infected lice and fleas could not survive the freezing temperatures of North Korea in winter. Weeks earlier people in Tianjin had already expressed similar doubts: 'The weather in Korea is very cold, how come the flies have not frozen to death?' one of them wondered. Others were openly sceptical of the danger from the alleged germs, suspecting they were fake. Li Shantang, identified by the regime as a 'counter-revolutionary' who had worked for the nationalists, boldly proclaimed that 'This is all communist propaganda in an attempt to get the world to hate Amer-

ica, don't listen to all that rubbish!' In Manchuria farmers shrugged their shoulders, pointing out that insects always appeared at the end of winter.<sup>48</sup>

Others panicked. The outbreak of the Korean War had unleashed fears of a Third World War. Now, two years later, some people lived in terror of an invisible enemy seemingly lurking in almost any kind of organic matter. In Shenyang several people who had been bitten by insects rushed to the hospital pleading for treatment. The premises were already crowded with those suffering seizures, pains or partial paralysis, all induced by the mere sight of a bug. A few hoarded food in anticipation of an apocalypse. Others, believing that the end was nigh, squandered what was left of their savings on wine and meat for one final feast. In places as far away as Chongqing, children were locked up inside their homes for fear of contamination. Entire villages in Henan shut down, as rumours spread of secret agents poisoning the wells. More worrying to the regime was the popular habit of interpreting natural catastrophes as harbingers of dynastic change. It was whispered that the regime was about to collapse and the nationalists would return. 'Heaven, the old regime is coming back!' proclaimed someone in Dalian. In Linying, Henan, farmers desecrated images of Mao, burning out his eyes, tearing down the posters or even attacking them with choppers.<sup>49</sup>

Everywhere, it seemed, poor villagers turned to miracle cures, drinking holy water thought to have magical powers. In Xuchang, surrounded by tobacco plants on the northern plain of Henan, thousands of farmers turned up at various sacred locations to drink the water, said to confer protection against germ warfare. In a village in Dehui, a region in Manchuria where brutal levies had brought famine, up to 1,000 believers gathered daily around an ancient well. Some were demobilised soldiers from the Korean War who came by bus from neighbouring provinces. The authorities decried these practices as superstition, but the local cadres were just as jittery. In Wuyang county the entire leadership locked themselves up in the government's health bureau to drink realgar, traditionally used in alchemy to ward off disease. They also covered themselves in a miracle balm.<sup>50</sup>

Whatever their reactions to the allegations, around the country people were mobilised to detect germ-warfare attacks. In Manchuria suspected victims were doused in a liquid solution of DDT. In Andong, close to the border, a team of 5,000 equipped with gauze masks, cotton sacks and gloves were on the hunt, scouring the surrounding mountains around the clock for suspicious insects. In Shenyang 20,000 people were deployed to mop floors, sweep streets, remove trash and disinfect the city down to every last

pavement slab. Here is how Tianjin fought back against biological infection:

Case #4: June 9, 1952. Insects were first discovered at 12 noon near the pier at the Tanggu Workers Union Hall. At 12:40 p.m., insects were discovered at the New Harbour Works Department, and at 1:30, in Beitang town. Insects were spread over an area of 2,002,400 square metres in New Harbour, and for over twenty Chinese miles [approximately 10 kilometres] along the shore at Beitang. Insect elimination was carried out under the direction of the Tianjin Municipal Disinfection Team. Masses organized to assist in catching insects included 1,586 townspeople, 300 soldiers and 3,150 workers. Individual insects were collected and then burned, boiled or buried. Insect species included inchworms, snout moths, wasps, aphids, butterflies . . . giant mosquitoes, etc. Samples of the insects were sent to the Central Laboratory in Beijing, where they were found to be infected with typhoid bacilli, dysentery bacilli and paratyphoid.<sup>51</sup>

Carried out like a military campaign, the drive to cleanse the country soon alienated large sections of the population. In Beijing everybody was inoculated against plague, typhus, typhoid and just about every other disease for which there was a vaccine, whether they wanted it or not. In the countryside compulsion assumed a wholly different dimension. In parts of Shandong the militia would arrive and block off both sides of the market, locking villagers in until they had been injected. In a village in Qihe the military locked all the houses and injected the assembled villagers themselves. Some young men, already worried about conscription, clambered over walls to escape. Women carrying their children tried to hide in a ditch and were too frightened to return home. Everywhere threats were common, and some of those who refused an injection were portrayed as spies on the imperialists' payroll. In Shaanxi, too, the campaign treated ordinary villagers as so many potential enemies to be brought to heel. In some places local cadres commanded that 'he who does not kill flies is guilty of germ warfare'. Households that failed to comply with the instructions had a black flag pinned on their front door. Under the pretext of germ warfare, a few women were forced to undergo a humiliating physical examination before a wedding certificate was granted.<sup>52</sup>

One commendable result of this phobia was that some of the most important cities were cleaned up. In Beijing the pavements were scrubbed, holes in the road were filled and households ordered to paint the walls of their houses up to a height of a metre with white disinfectant. Trees were ringed with disinfectant to keep them free from crawling insects. In a swampy city like Tianjin, where mosquitoes could easily breed, local resid-

ents were organised in brigades and supplied with picks, shovels and poles to fill in hundreds of cesspools, one bucketful of soil at a time.<sup>53</sup>

But the drive to clean up cities also had adverse effects on the natural environment. Shrubs, bushes and plants were removed to deprive pests of hiding places. Large bushfires were started to fumigate flies and mosquitoes. Lime whitewash appeared everywhere, on buildings, trees, bushes and even grass, killing vegetation and turning villages and cities into a grey mass streaked with white and dotted, here and there, with red. DDT and other harmful pesticides became a permanent feature in the attack on nature, helping to turn cities into stark concrete landscapes devoid of greenery.<sup>54</sup>

The campaign also had another visible effect. Many residents, from traffic police and food handlers to street sweepers, started wearing cotton masks, which always surprised foreign visitors. This habit would last for decades. In the words of William Kinmond, it gave 'even young girls and boys the appearance of being fugitives from operating rooms'.<sup>55</sup>

From north to south, people were also required to kill the 'five pests', namely flies, mosquitoes, fleas, bedbugs and rats. In Beijing every person had to produce the tail of one rat every week. Those who greatly exceeded the quota were allowed to fly a red flag over the gate of their house, while those who failed had to raise a black flag. An underground market in tails rapidly developed. In Guangdong, the campaign for rodent prevention also came with strict quotas. In July 1952 each district was ordered to kill at least 50,000 rats, the tails to be severed and delivered to the authorities preserved in ethanol. As in Beijing, the pressure was such that many people turned to a thriving black market to meet their share of the quota. In some cities even 0.20 yuan was insufficient to secure a tail. In Shanghai the issue was not so much rat tails as insect larvae, which had to be collected by the tonne. The penalty for delivering too few buckets was deprivation of all material benefits. As a result, people even took trains to the countryside to collect the stuff, or else tried to bribe their way through the entire process.<sup>56</sup>

Although the campaign did much to spread awareness of the causes of some diseases, it did little to improve basic health care. In January 1953 a report presented at a nationwide conference on hygiene revealed that the incidence of gastrointestinal diseases had actually increased the previous year. In Shanxi hundreds of tonnes of sugar products contained flies and bees. In Shanghai dead rats were found in moon cakes, while in Jinan maggots wriggled their way through bean-paste cakes. Entire groups of people suffered from appalling disease rates, ranging from tuberculosis to hepatitis. In parts of the country half of all miners were sick, as the relentless drive for

higher output had led to the neglect of even the most basic facilities. Nine months later the Ministry of Health, in a self-criticism addressed to Mao Zedong, accepted that much of the campaign in 1952 had been based on coercion and had proved wasteful, 'to the point where it prevented the masses from engaging in production and gave rise to their discontent'. More detailed investigations showed the extent of waste caused by the campaign. In Shaanxi, for instance, a full year's supply of medicine had been squandered in just six months, as local officials had pursued showcase projects for the campaign rather than using their scarce resources to improve the health of the people they represented.<sup>57</sup>

Dogs never appeared on the list of 'five pests' but were also targeted for elimination. All over China one could find them, many of them crippled and mangy, wandering the streets and rubbish dumps in packs, fighting with each other for a scrap of food. In the cities some families kept them as pets, while in the countryside they were popular for guard duty, herding and food. They were routinely put down in communist-held areas during the civil war. Like everything else, the cull came in stages after liberation. In Beijing, a swoop cleared thousands of wild dogs from the streets, often with the support of local residents, as policemen armed with wire nooses on bamboo poles rounded them up. Then, by September 1949, dog owners were required to register their pets and keep the animals indoors. A year later the destruction of registered dogs started. Some of the animals were voluntarily turned in, but a few owners refused to surrender them. In a few cases the police were even confronted by angry dog keepers, who sometimes had the crowd on their side. The police then started breaking into houses. Owners came back home to find their doors broken down and their pets gone.<sup>58</sup>

But the campaign really took off during the fight against germ warfare, when teams of dog chasers appeared on the streets, carrying out house-to-house searches. Most of the animals were removed to an enormous compound outside the city wall. As one resident in Beijing noted, 'They were taken away in small carts like garbage cars, closed tight and packed solid, and if you passed one you could hear them thrashing inside and see blood on the sides of the cart.' In the compound hundreds of dogs were kept in cages. As the dogs were not fed, they attacked each other, the stronger eating the weaker. Occasionally a policeman would put a wire noose over the head of a healthier specimen and swing it around till it choked to death. Then the animal would be flung to the ground and skinned. The hide, still

steaming from the body heat, was put over a cage to dry as the other dogs cowered underneath.<sup>59</sup>

Even though her roommates objected to the animal, Esther Cheo kept a small female dog in her dormitory, which she had taken in as a puppy. She shared all her food with it, and the dog was named Hsiao Mee, after the millet they ate. During the cull one of her colleagues who disliked dogs opened the door and let her out. The dog was soon caught and carried away, but, with the help of a high-ranking cadre, Esther managed to locate the compound where the animals were kept. 'I walked up and down stumbling over dead and dying dogs, shouting out Hsiao Mee's name, trying to drown out the barks and whines of hundreds of dogs. Eventually I found her. She was in a cage with several others. She jumped up and tried to lick my face, trembling with fear and perhaps excited, hoping that I had come to take her home. I could only sit there and stroke her.' Esther came back to the compound regularly, even taking a pair of scissors to the dog's coat in the hope that she would not be slaughtered for her skin. But in the end all she was allowed to do was to feed her pet some scraps of pork from the canteen and look on as the animal shivered and ate from the bowl in her mangled coat. Finally, with the help of a sympathetic cadre, Esther was given a pistol. She took off the safety catch, pressed the barrel against the dog's ear and blew her head off.<sup>60</sup>

Dogs were denounced as a threat to public hygiene and a symbol of bourgeois decadence at a time of food shortages. Except for those owned by a few privileged diplomats and top officials, they were soon cleared from the cities. But parts of the countryside continued to resist for several years. In Guangdong, efforts to impose a cull backfired in 1952, as angry villagers openly defied the authorities. Killing a landlord was one thing, but taking away a man's dog was another matter altogether, as they protected homesteads, crops and livestock. In Shandong, where almost every family kept a dog, repeated culls also failed. In the end, however, even the countryside fell into line.<sup>61</sup>

Stalin died in March 1953. Within months the new leadership in Moscow moved rapidly towards an agreement over Korea with the Americans and signed a ceasefire on 27 July 1953. Allegations of germ warfare also ended abruptly as the extent of the deception came to light in Moscow. The claims, apparently, had first come from commanders in the field. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai ordered a laboratory investigation of the evidence and dispatched epidemic-prevention teams to Korea, but even before the tests



were completed they had begun condemning the United States for engaging in bacteriological warfare. Once the reports had turned out to be inaccurate, Mao was unwilling to abandon the propaganda benefits of his crusade against the United States. A report to Lavrenti Beria, head of Soviet intelligence, outlined what had happened: 'False plague regions were created, burials of bodies of those who died and their disclosure were organized, measures were taken to receive [sic] the plague and cholera bacillus.' On 2 May 1953 a secret resolution of the presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers dismissed all allegations: 'The Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were misled. The spread in the press of information about the use by the United States of bacteriological weapons in Korea was based on false information. The accusations against the Americans were fictitious.' A top-ranking emissary was sent to Beijing with a harsh message: cease all allegations at once. They stopped as suddenly as they had started.<sup>62</sup>

## Part Three

# Regimentation (1952–56)

## The Purge

On a cold, wintry day in February 1952, a crowd of 21,000 filled the stadium in Baoding, the provincial seat of Hebei. On the stage sat several judges. Facing the people stood two victims, their hands tied behind their backs, eyes fixed on the ground, two armed guards in thick padded jackets right behind them. Long banners, reaching from shoulders to waist, denounced them as criminals and traitors. Zhang Qingchun, head of the Hebei Austerity Inspection Committee, detailed the heinous crimes each of them had committed. A stony silence followed his long speech, as the judge finally stood up to pronounce the death sentence. Heads bowed in submission, the accused never lifted their faces to look at the crowd or their accusers. They were immediately marched off to the execution grounds of Baoding. As a sign of mercy, they were shot in the heart rather than in the head.<sup>1</sup>

Had it not been for the identity of the victims, the trial might have looked like any other public execution carried out in the name of the people. But this one was different. Liu Qingshan and Zhang Zishan were key players in the local party hierarchy. One was the former secretary of the Tianjin Prefectural Committee, the other the head of the Tianjin Commissioner's Office. Arrested in November 1951, they were accused of abusing their power, diverting funds and conducting illegal economic activities. Each had used his position to build a small empire, amassing exorbitant profits, embezzling large sums of money and squandering most of it.

The trial caused ripples throughout the ranks of the party. Mao himself had approved the executions, despite pleas for pardon from Huang Jing, the head of Tianjin. 'Only if we execute the two of them can we prevent twenty, two hundred, two thousand or twenty thousand corrupt officials from committing various crimes,' the Chairman opined. Even their record of past service to the cause did not save them from the firing squad. Their deaths were meant to serve as a warning to others in the party.<sup>2</sup>

Three years earlier a nervous Mao had entered Beijing, joking that he was going to sit the imperial examination. 'We should be able to pass it,' Zhou Enlai reassured him. 'We cannot step back.' 'If we retreat we fail,' Mao chimed in.

‘Under no circumstances can we be like Li Zicheng, all of us have to make the grade.’<sup>3</sup>

Li Zicheng was a folk hero who had formed a rebel army to fight the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century. He won popular support by promising a new era of peace and prosperity. Hundreds of thousands of villagers rallied behind his calls for land distribution and the abolition of exorbitant grain taxes. In 1644 his victorious rebels sacked the capital, Beijing. The Chongzhen emperor, in a fit of drunken despair, tried to kill his daughters and concubines, hoping to save them from the hands of the rebels. Then he stumbled to the imperial gardens on a hill behind the Forbidden City, loosened his long hair to cover his face, and hanged himself from the rafters of a pavilion. Li Zicheng proclaimed himself the emperor of a new Shun dynasty, but it was not to last. Within months the Manchus crushed his army at Shanhaiguan and founded the Qing.

In a long essay commemorating the fall of the Ming 300 years before, the poet Guo Moruo warned in 1944 that Li Zicheng had been able to hold the capital only for a matter of weeks, as his rapacious troops terrorised the population and succumbed to widespread corruption. Guo’s essay spelled out the analogies between the Ming bandits and the communist rebels, warning that strict ideological discipline would be required in the civil war to control China. Mao liked the essay and wrote to Guo: ‘Small victories lead to arrogance, big victories even more so. They result in repeated failures. We must be careful not to make the same mistake.’ The essay was published in Yan’an, the remote and isolated mountain area in Shaanxi where the communist party had established its headquarters during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup>

Far behind enemy lines, Mao used his political skills in Yan’an to consolidate his own role within the party, making sure that the constitution endorsed Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the political theories developed in his official publications. In 1942 he launched a major purge of his enemies, eliminating his rivals one by one, a drive he called a ‘Rectification Campaign’. As Gao Hua, a leading historian of the purge, has noted, its goal was ‘to intimidate the whole party with violence and terror, to uproot any individual independent thought, to make the whole party subject to the single utmost authority of Mao’. Mao orchestrated the entire campaign, supervising everything down to the last detail, but he let his henchman Kang Sheng take centre stage. Other close allies of the Central General Study Committee, set up to investigate the dossier of every party member, were Peng Zhen, Li Fuchun, Gao Gang and later Liu Shaoqi. The Study Com-

mittee ran everything, unhindered by any constitutional constraints, in effect converting the party into Mao's personal dictatorship. Leading officials such as Zhou Enlai, Peng Dehuai, Chen Yi and Liu Bocheng were forced to produce self-criticisms, write confessions and apologise for past mistakes. Everybody went through the wringer, as accusations of spying spiralled out of control. Party members at every level were forced to denounce others, trying to save themselves from false allegations. Endless witch-hunts took place, as thousands of suspects were locked up, investigated, tortured, purged and occasionally executed. At night the ghostly howls of people imprisoned in caves could be heard. These were the ones who had lost their minds during the inquisition.

By 1944 over 15,000 alleged agents and spies had been unmasked. Mao allowed the terror to run amok, assuming the role of a self-effacing, distant yet benevolent leader. Then he stepped in to curb the violence, letting Kang take the fall. Those who had managed to survive the horror turned to him as a saviour. The Rectification Campaign was the prototype of many movements to come.<sup>5</sup>

Guo Moruo's essay on the fall of the Ming came at the height of the Yan'an terror. Mao had it reprinted and widely distributed, warning that weak-willed cadres who had survived the guns of the enemy would be defeated by the 'sugar-coated bullets' of the bourgeoisie, a metaphor for corruption. By the end of 1951, almost three years after the conquest of the country, it seemed indeed that the underhanded ways of capitalism were vanquishing the party. The sudden expansion of power and the intake of new members had weakened ideological purity and bred complacency. A taste for the good life extended from the top leaders all the way down to local cadres, who felt that, after fighting hard for the revolution, they should sit back and enjoy the material perks to which their struggle entitled them. 'Extravagance, waste and much feasting' flourished among the lower ranks, tarnishing the image of the party.

Bureaucracy crippled the economy, threatening China's ability to conduct the war in Korea. The budget ballooned out of all proportion. Even worse, many cadres were corrupt, pocketing large sums of money they should have contributed to the war effort. Zhang Zishan and Liu Qingshan had just been arrested. The Chairman imagined that their case was merely the tip of the iceberg, as a plethora of greedy hands dipped into the state coffers. Mao warned his colleagues: '[We] must pay serious attention to the fact that our cadres have been corrupted by the bourgeoisie and are guilty

of severe embezzlement. [We should] pay attention and detect, expose and punish them. We also need a big struggle to deal with them.’<sup>6</sup>

It was time to clean out the party. Bo Yibo, minister of finance, was put in charge of the campaign, but Mao presided over the entire operation, issuing dozens of directives to other top leaders. The Chairman barely consulted his senior colleagues. All had to report to him directly. Zhou Enlai was treated like a secretary at his master’s beck and call. By the end of December, the Chairman demanded that monthly reports from the county level upwards be sent directly to Beijing so that the performance of their officials could be monitored.<sup>7</sup>

Mao used his control of the central apparatus to set the tone and whip up the pressure. As usual, his instructions were vague, leaving his subordinates to guess what his real intentions were. Seemingly everyone was a target, from powerful ministers down to local officials. No legal definitions existed of what precisely constituted ‘corruption’, not to mention ‘waste’, which was so broad a category as to include virtually everything from deliberate stripping of state assets to minor acts of negligence. Mao was adamant: ‘Although waste and corruption are different in nature, the losses caused by waste are bigger than those caused by corruption, and are similar to embezzlement, theft, fraud or bribery. So we should severely punish waste at the same time as we severely punish corruption.’ The only guideline was the distinction between trivial suspects, described as mere ‘flies’, and larger cases labelled ‘tigers’. Big tigers were those who had embezzled over 10,000 yuan, and small tigers were guilty of fraud involving more than 1,000 yuan.<sup>8</sup>

Tiger-Hunting Teams tried to outdo each other in trapping their targets, encouraged from above by Mao. Units were set against units, counties competed with counties, provinces vied with provinces. On 9 January 1952 the Chairman praised Gansu for resolutely fighting tigers. He worried that other provinces, where corruption was even worse, had set much lower targets: ‘this is not realistic’, he pronounced. On 2 February 1952 Zhejiang reported that there might be up to a thousand tigers inside its borders. Mao scoffed, pointing out that in a province of that size at least 3,000 cases could be discovered. Five days later came the announcement that Zhejiang harboured 3,700 tigers. Mao circulated the report, urging other provinces to adjust their targets upwards. Soon Bo Yibo enthusiastically reported a new record of 100,000 tigers for all of east China.<sup>9</sup>

On the ground people scrambled to fulfil their quotas. Some took advantage of the winter holidays, enrolling students in Tiger-Hunting Teams.

Tommy Wu, a student aged twenty-four, was sent with six other students to the Art Supply Service attached to the Zhejiang Institute of Fine Arts, located on the shore of the West Lake in Hangzhou.

I worked there under the office of the Campaign Against the Three Evils. The entire staff and all the workers were organized to study party policies attached to this campaign. The staff was then called upon to make a clean breast of their crimes and accuse others they knew to be criminals as well. These crimes included embezzling, forgery, theft, bribery and other forms of corruption. Some suspects were already being locked up in isolated rooms within the offices. Most of those locked up were directors on various levels. Some were even old party members from the early Yan'an days. We had no mercy on those we saw to be 'criminals'.

In the end, despite all the pressure, Tommy Wu's team only found a man who had appropriated a camera and a little more than a hundred yuan. They spent three months on the entire campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Up in Beijing, Dan Ling, the schoolboy who had come down with diarrhoea after standing on Tiananmen Square for ten hours to watch the parade in October 1949, was now a member of the Communist Youth League. He worked for the Number One Automobile Factory and was also asked to join a Tiger-Hunting Team. They soon identified a manager suspected of having stolen an expensive piece of equipment. A former member of the nationalist party, his services had been retained because of his technical expertise. Dan was given a list of the man's alleged crimes, and put in charge of a meeting to question him. Assembled workers at the factory screamed at the victim, 'Confess!', but an admission of guilt was not good enough. He was pressed for more confessions and forced to denounce others.

Mass rallies were held. The Ministry of Heavy Industry organised a huge parade in Zhongshan Park, dragging out every major suspect and forcing them to confront the masses in denunciation meetings. Extensive publicity surrounded the most notorious cases. In Beijing the biggest tiger was Song Degui, an officer in the Public Security Bureau who seemed to embody every kind of depravity. He was accused of siphoning off a gigantic sum of money. He had had an affair with the wife of a former capitalist, and then slept with the woman's daughter. He was even a drug addict. Song was wonderful material for Dan's team, who studied the case as a guide for their own investigations.<sup>11</sup>

'Every organization became a battlefield where ruthless struggles were fought.' First major culprits like Song Degui were forced to admit their own corruption, then they were made to inform on the corruption of others below them in an effort to save themselves. Suspects were also unleashed on



other suspects in mutual-denunciation sessions: this was called ‘using a tiger to bite a tiger’. Lesser offenders were suspended from their duties and put under house arrest so that they could ‘reflect on their past behaviour’. Even those who were not suspect had to make reports on their past activities and proffer self-criticisms, only to risk being denounced and ostracised.<sup>12</sup>

Soon ‘confessions’ began to pour out of every government office. Corruption seemed to be everywhere. Another 133 cadres besides Song Degui were found to be corrupt in the Ministry of Public Security. In the Ministry of Finance, government officials had connived with the private sector to defraud the state of goods worth millions of yuan. Overall, in the upper echelons of power, an astounding 10,000 people were corrupt, according to Bo Yibo, including eighteen big tigers who had taken more than 10,000 yuan.<sup>13</sup>

Even more serious was the situation among the rank and file, as local cadres socialised with businessmen and entrepreneurs, accepting bribes as if they were fringe benefits. In the entire north-west, 340,000 cases of corruption were uncovered, although Xi Zhongxun suggested that in reality there might well be three times as many culprits. In Tianshui, Gansu, one out of every three officials working in tax collection lined his own pockets. Other regions were just as bad. In Jinan, the capital of Shandong, the leading officials of virtually every department wine and dined private entrepreneurs. In the police, bribes extended from the ordinary patrolman all the way up to the head of a police station. One deputy mayor was guilty of having lavished 3,000 yuan – or sixty times the monthly salary of a skilled worker – on entertaining guests in less than a year. The local Bureau for Industry was accused of taking 70,000 yuan in kickbacks. Everywhere, it seemed, the sugar-coated bullets of the enemy had created a class of corrupt, depraved government officials just as bad as their predecessors.<sup>14</sup>

Many people applauded the campaign. Here was a party so determined to stamp out corruption that it even shot some of its own leaders. ‘The general belief was that the regime really was going to clean up its ranks. I also believed this, and I approved of it,’ noted Robert Loh, who now worked for a cotton mill in Shanghai. Others, such as Chow Ching-wen, a leader of the Democratic League co-opted by the communist party, had seen the extravagance and corruption from the inside and also believed that the movement was necessary to correct the situation. But others had their doubts. Dr Li Zhisui, who was such a supporter of the cause that he became frustrated when he was not allowed to join the war effort in Korea, felt a deep anguish that would stay with him for the rest of his life. His brother and cousin, the very men who had introduced him to the communist party three years earli-

er, were now being attacked, although Li knew they were innocent. But he was too afraid to speak out. ‘Had I defended them, I too would have been attacked.’<sup>15</sup>

Underneath the veneer of a well-orchestrated campaign, the pressure to find targets produced abuse at every level. In Hebei some suspects were insulted, beaten or forced to stand in the cold without clothes. The sessions could last for days on end, as the victims were ‘ceaselessly interrogated until they uttered a figure [of embezzled funds] that corresponded to the one demanded of them’. In Wu’an county, hair was pulled and heads were plunged into toilets. Over a hundred tigers were discovered using these methods, although not one single case was based on hard evidence. In Shijiazhuang suspects were buried in snow, forced to kneel on hot ashes or threatened with execution. A few were paraded through the streets with tall conical hats, to the delight of the children who had joined Tiger-Hunting Teams.<sup>16</sup>

When no tigers could be identified, the cadres turned against the workers instead. In the Shijiazhuang Railway Factory, several hundred of them were subjected to struggle sessions that were so gruelling that one man drank petrol to put an end to the misery. In the North-west Normal University in Lanzhou, Gansu, official support for violence was such that:

everyone, whether or not there is any proof of corruption, is beaten at denunciation meetings, and even their wives are beaten and denounced. Some of the merchants outside the campus are dragged into the school and beaten. Once the suspects have been beaten, they are tortured. For instance, they are forced to sit on their haunches with a kettle of boiling water on their heads, they are stripped of their clothes, beaten with ropes, sometimes until they pass out, a few almost to death.<sup>17</sup>

But under cover of popular approval and high-power publicity for outstanding cases, something even more sinister was taking place. The authorities were quietly liquidating many government officials without trial. ‘Disappearances’ became common, and they pointed towards another purpose of the campaign: the liquidation of a whole group of people. When the communists had first come to power in 1949, they had urged all the civil service employees to remain at their posts, repeatedly assuring them of the regime’s protection and even gratitude. They helped by maintaining the continued operation of essential services; they ensured a smooth transfer of power. By late 1951, however, sufficient communist cadres had been trained to take over the administration. The former employees were no longer needed, and many were purged.<sup>18</sup>

Close to 4 million government employees were hounded throughout the campaign, some of them tortured so badly that they chose to commit suicide. In a summary made in October 1952, at the end of the campaign, a secret report by An Ziwen concluded that 1.2 million corrupt individuals had been discovered to have embezzled a total of 600 million yuan. Fewer than 200,000 of these culprits were party members, demonstrating the extent of the purge against civil servants who had been retained from the previous regime. The report also admitted that at least 10 per cent of all cases were based on false accusations and forced confessions. But in the end it mattered very little that so many victims had been wronged, as long as the government was cleansed of its most unreliable elements. Tens of thousands of people were sent to labour camps.<sup>19</sup>

A few high-ranking leaders were executed in public, but it is doubtful that the real corruption at the top of the party was tackled. Chow Chingwen, who welcomed the campaign at first, quickly became disabused. He noted that 'those who were corrupt, but loyal to Mao, escaped with only their money confiscated and light punishment, while those who were found to be wavering in their support of Mao were killed'. After Zhang Zishan and Liu Qingshan had been arrested, a team of investigators pored over the dossiers of the top leadership in Tianjin, finding a web of deceit involving scores of senior party members, most of whom escaped with a mere slap on the wrist. As Chow noted, 'to punish all the offenders would give a bad name to the regime and even threaten its stability'.<sup>20</sup>

Soon the campaign moved beyond the ranks of the government. Dark hints that malevolent outside forces were undermining public morality were everywhere. On 30 November 1951, as he was about to launch the campaign against corruption, Mao told the leadership that 'our cadres have been corrupted by the bourgeoisie'. Over the following weeks reports came in from cities all over the country, linking government officials to cases of bribery, theft and tax evasion by businessmen and entrepreneurs. On 5 January 1952 Mao reached the conclusion that the bourgeoisie had been waging a 'savage offensive' against the party that was 'more serious and dangerous than a war'. A resolute counter-offensive was needed to deliver a fatal blow within a matter of months. In the words of historian Michael Sheng, 'Mao now declared war on the bourgeoisie'.<sup>21</sup>

The war came in the guise of a campaign against the five alleged sins of the bourgeoisie: bribery, tax evasion, pilfering government property, cheat-

ing on contracts and stealing state secrets. These terms were broad enough to encompass virtually anything. Cadres jumped at the opportunity to deflect accusations of corruption against themselves, and turned on private trade with a vengeance.

The business community was already reeling from three years of communism. Not all of its members had tied their fates to the new regime by deciding to stay behind in 1949. Many entrepreneurs and industrialists had fled the country even before Manchuria fell to the communists. For a brief period after the Second World War, trade and commerce seemed to be booming again. Factories went back into production after the devastation of the war, and some businessmen had ambitious plans for expansion. But the nationalists soon started interfering with the market, adopting policies that subjected private enterprise to the heavy hand of the state, heralding what would happen after 1949. In the banking sector, for instance, over 200 banks were competing for customers in 1945, but by 1948 the Bank of China had imposed a virtual monopoly, as its competitors had been driven out of business or taken over by the government. The central bank, in turn, started controlling the import and export of foreign currency, limiting what individuals could take with them while travelling abroad to just US\$200. Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, was put in charge of fighting inflation: he gaoled several thousand entrepreneurs in Shanghai for corruption before abandoning state control in October 1948.<sup>22</sup>

Squeezed out of business by the nationalists, entrepreneurs and their families started leaving in droves in the years following the Second World War. Many went to South America. Paraguay, where a visa could be obtained on arrival, was an attractive destination. Brazil also loomed large, all the more since Soong May-ling, the wife of the Generalissimo, had visited the country in June 1944. Some industrialists shipped whole factories to South America, while others bought properties, acquired stakes in banks, oil and shipping or invested in coffee and cocoa plantations from São Paulo to Caracas and Buenos Aires.

A few had exceptional foresight, others were just lucky in deciding to relocate abroad well before 1949. Another popular destination was Hong Kong. The Japanese occupation of China from 1937 onwards had already prepared many industrialists to emigrate to the crown colony, as they sought a safe haven away from the mainland. Many thought that their exile would be temporary and took only the bare essentials with them. Others went back and forth, hoping to be able to resettle after the end of the war. Alex Woo's family came to Hong Kong in 1948, stayed for a while and then decided to

go back: 'The first time we came was by boat, but after three months we went back to Shanghai. Things there were getting really bad so my father came out with my younger brother and myself. I was just eight years old. There were no longer any commercial flights so we took a military plane. It was just before the Communists marched in,' he remembered. Many families tried to hedge their bets, moving some members to South America, keeping a foothold in Hong Kong while packing off a few of the younger ones to study in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

In some cases one or more members stayed in China in order to protect the family assets. In the case of the Rong (also known as the Yung family), one of the wealthiest in the country, most of their assets were liquidated or mortgaged to the hilt before 1949. They left behind one of their seven sons as an informal hostage to the bank. Aged thirty-three, a graduate of St John's University in Shanghai, Rong Yiren looked after some twenty textile factories and flour mills with 80,000 employees.

The communists welcomed him – as well as the many shopkeepers, bankers, traders and entrepreneurs who had no choice but to remain in China in 1949. The official slogan was the New Democracy, and the party assured those now labelled as the 'national bourgeoisie' that they could continue to run their enterprises on a private basis. In reality, as in the satellite states of the Soviet Union, the New Democracy was part of a bogus coalition between different forces that the party was simply unable to control at this early stage. When they took the country in 1949, the communists suffered from an acute shortage of manpower, leaving them little choice but to use the commercial and industrial skills of the business community. Like the retained government employees, they were told to stay in their jobs and work for the new regime.<sup>24</sup>

Privately Mao had no illusions about the need to eliminate capitalism. In May 1949, as the leadership camped on the outskirts of Beijing, preparing themselves to take over the country, Mao shared a meal with Huang Kecheng, then a commander in the army. The Chairman asked him what the communist party's first priority should be, now that victory was close. Having seen the devastation caused by years of warfare, Huang opined that economic reconstruction would rank highest. Mao sternly shook his head: 'No! The most important task is class struggle. We have to resolve the question of the capitalist class.' Months earlier he had lambasted as 'muddle-headed' those who thought that the party should rely on the bourgeoisie.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever the long-term strategy of the party, private business was soon in dire straits. In the first year after liberation many enterprises were com-

pelled to accept wage increases that vastly inflated the costs of production. Punitive taxes followed, some of them applied retroactively, bearing little relationship to the actual income of private enterprises. Their remaining assets were further drained through the enforced purchase of Victory Bonds. The cadres appointed to supervise commerce and industry compounded the problem. Many lacked basic knowledge of the world of trade and business and were reticent and suspicious, checking and rechecking every transaction. The trade embargo imposed by the nationalists also crippled international commerce, while the communists began redirecting all foreign trade towards the Soviet Union after Mao returned from Moscow in early 1950. Once bustling commercial districts had slipped into decay by the summer of 1950, as described in Chapter 3.

Aware that taxation was killing the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs, finance minister Bo Yibo reformed the tax system in June 1950. Labour activism was curbed, while the state started ordering products in massive quantities from some of the larger industrial concerns, saving them from bankruptcy. The People's Bank of China selectively used 'encouragement loans' to rescue other private concerns, increasing their dependence on government credit.

Tariff and exchange controls brought the business community closer to its knees. Gradually everything standing between the entrepreneur and the state was eliminated. The rule of law was suspended. People's tribunals replaced independent courts. In June 1950, branches of the party-controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions were substituted for independent trade unions. From 1951 onwards, local branches of the party-controlled All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce likewise took over from independent chambers of commerce. To maintain the appearance of the New Democracy, industrial leaders like Rong Yiren were invited to join their boards. The party also set up compulsory Management Committees to negotiate conflicts between workers and their bosses, in effect controlling both labour and capital.<sup>26</sup>

The Korean War brought a further clampdown on the private sector. A Donations Drive replaced the Victory Bonds Campaign, as massive contributions in gold, jewellery, dollars or other foreign currencies were extracted from manufacturers, entrepreneurs and traders to finance the war. But, most of all, the campaign of terror that unfolded after October 1950 silenced all opposition to the regime. As hundreds of thousands of real or imagined enemies were executed before large crowds, entrepreneurs feared being dragged away to the police station to face accusations of being 'a per-

son of the compradore class who built up his fortune by means of depriving the legal livelihood of the working class' or 'an agent working for the nationalist government'. As most foreigners were hounded out of the country, they left behind a vulnerable, fearful and isolated bourgeoisie cut off from all their contacts with the rest of the world.

The campaign against the bourgeoisie unleashed by Mao in January 1952 followed well-established techniques which had been fine-tuned during land reform. At denunciation meetings the workers were encouraged to turn against their managers. The trade unions established work brigades, each member taking an oath of loyalty and promising to 'stand firm' and prosecute the campaign thoroughly. Traditional links with employers were severed as employees 'spoke bitterness', urged by local cadres to dig out every past slight they could think of. The workers were now the masters. Party activists took the lead, searching for evidence of criminal activity. 'Clerks and workers, on instructions from their labour unions, pried into account books, opened safes, and eavesdropped on telephone calls in a feverish search for something incriminating.' Entire cities were placed on a war footing, as lorries trundled through business districts, stopping before shops with their loudspeakers blaring: 'Hey, proprietor! Evidence of all your misdeeds is now in our hands. Confess!' The windows of suspected businesses were plastered with bills and placards, while gangs of demonstrators blocked their entrances. Denunciation boxes, bright red with a small slit at the top, were provided to make it more convenient for people to denounce others. Big banners fluttered over busy streets: 'Sternly Punish Corruption Culprits'.<sup>27</sup>

Terrified merchants, traders and bankers crowded into confession meetings to confront their accusers. Before he was locked up in his office to write a confession on his work in the cotton mills operated by Rong Yiren, employee Robert Loh found that posters had been put up on the wall in front of his desk. They contained slogans such as 'Crush the Vicious Attack of the Capitalist Class', 'Surrender, You Vile Capitalist', 'A Complete Confession is the Road to Survival, Anything Less Will Lead to Death'. A loudspeaker was installed in one of the office windows. It sputtered briefly and then burst into an ear-splitting racket, broadcasting the mass meeting under way in the main dining hall. Most of it was an harangue against capitalism, as party activists worked the crowd into a frenzy. Then cadres took over the microphone to address Loh directly. They shouted abuse, insults and threats, admonishing him to make a full confession. This went on for a full afternoon. In the evening a cook dropped a blanket on the floor and



reluctantly placed a bowl of noodles on the edge of his desk. Guards made sure he could not leave, even accompanying him to the toilet. Later, when he tried to sleep on the floor of his office, they sat grimly in front of him, refusing to turn off the lights at night.

This went on for two days. On the morning of the third day, as he was escorted to the party secretary's office, the employees jeered and called him a 'capitalist swine' and 'unscrupulous dog'. Some spat at him, a few tried to hit him. The most vehement were those with whom Loh had been most friendly. 'At first, this cut me deeply, but then I realized that precisely because they had been friendly to me, they would be the ones threatened the most and for their own safety they would strain to show that they no longer had anything but hatred and contempt for a capitalist criminal like me. Oddly enough, this thought made me feel better.'

After more admonitions from the leading cadre, Loh spent another two days of torment under the constant scrutiny of his guards, listening to the accusations broadcast over the loudspeaker and trying to come up with a plausible crime for which he could atone. He submitted one confession after another. His seventh attempt was accepted. Then came the day of reckoning, as he had to 'face the masses'.

My entrance was the signal for a tremendous uproar. The screams of rage, the shouted slogans and insults, were deafening. I was made to stand with humbly bowed head before the small stage on which the communist officials sat at tables. I had lost 13 pounds. I was filthy, unshaven and exhausted. My knees trembled with both weakness and fear. The shouting behind me was turned off suddenly. The party secretary rose and read off the list of the people's charges against me.

When he had finished, Loh had to bow to the crowd. One by one, representatives from every group of employees came to the stage to denounce him.<sup>28</sup>

Robert Loh escaped relatively lightly. Many others did not. Some were terrorised with threats of the death penalty, and then told that their fate depended on their own contributions to the campaign. In order to save themselves, they turned on others. Terror sometimes drove them to become even more ferocious than the cadres. Since they had exclusive knowledge of their own particular branch of business, they were also in the best position to pinpoint crimes to which others were pressed to confess. Even wives and children were used in the denunciations. In Changsha an accountant named Li Shengzhen provided information on dozens of cases, denouncing his own father. 'Relatives are not as close as the state and members of the same class,' he proclaimed, according to security boss Luo Ruiqing, who proudly

reported the case to the Chairman. The communist press reported that children were instructed to expose the crimes of their parents. One told his father, 'If you don't confess your own corruption, other people will expose you just the same; if you remain obstinate, I won't recognize you as my father.'<sup>29</sup>

Denunciations took place under intense pressure in closed meetings. But sometimes they were made in public, as victims turned up in their warmest clothes, expecting to be sent to a labour camp in Manchuria. Some captains of industry – Rong Yiren, Liu Hongsheng, Hu Juewu – shook with fear as they stood on the stage, desperately hurling accusations at each other, Bo Yibo explained with satisfaction when writing to Mao Zedong. Breaking down in tears, Rong Yiren openly proclaimed his shame when confronted with his family's exploitative past, confessing to 20 million yuan in ill-gotten gains, an amount he had arrived at by spending weeks going through mountains of ledgers.<sup>30</sup>

Techniques acquired during land reform were widely used to inflict pain and humiliation. In the cities some victims were tied up, ordered to kneel on a small bench or bend down for hours on end. Sleep deprivation was common. Tactics became rougher in the countryside. Throughout Sichuan people accused of being 'capitalists' were cursed, stripped, beaten, hanged and flogged. Work teams often served as judge, jury and executioner, deciding, for example, to double a fine when a payment was made immediately and to shoot those who failed to pay up on more than four occasions. In some cities in Guangdong, tax inspectors took factory owners to witness public executions, pointing out that they would meet the same fate if they failed to comply. Some workers in Jiangmen, on the other hand, presented a 'bill for exploitation' to the factory owners, who were beaten, forced to kneel in accusation meetings and locked up in the toilets. Other forms of physical torture were 'very common'. In Shenyang merchants were stripped by the workers and forced to stand in the cold for hours on end.<sup>31</sup>

Few victims died, but many committed suicide. 'The sight of people jumping out of windows became commonplace,' reported Robert Loh, who saw it happen twice, even though he seldom left his house during this period. 'The coffin makers were sold out weeks ahead. The funeral homes doubled up so that several funerals were held simultaneously in one room. The parks were patrolled to prevent people from hanging themselves from the trees.' In Beijing, when the frozen West Lake began to melt in spring, more than ten bodies were found in one corner alone.<sup>32</sup>

Suicide was not easily accomplished, as suspects were under constant supervision. But nothing bred ingenuity quite like despair. Some entrepren-

eurs who had links to the pharmaceutical industry managed to obtain cyanide pills and swallowed them when dragged away to attend struggle meetings. Others would hide a piece of rope and hang themselves in a closet. A few slashed their wrists with a watch crystal while wrapped in a blanket, pretending to sleep on the office floor. The majority jumped from windows. Accurate statistics are impossible to come by, but in Shanghai, the city that bore the brunt of the attack, 644 people killed themselves in two months, or more than ten daily – if one can trust the statistics the party compiled.<sup>33</sup>

In an orgy of false accusations and arbitrary denunciations, few escaped with their reputations intact. By February no more than 10,000 of a total 50,000 ‘capitalists’ in Beijing were considered honest. Similar figures came from other parts of the country. To punish all would wreck the economy. Mao had a solution to this conundrum. He came up with a quota, ordering that a few should be killed to set the tone, while exemplary punishment should focus on 5 per cent of the most ‘reactionary’ suspects. Across most cities, by a rough rule of thumb, about 1 per cent of the accused were shot, a further 1 per cent sent to labour camps for life, and 2 to 3 per cent imprisoned for terms of ten years or more.<sup>34</sup>

The vast majority – classified as ‘basically law-abiding’ and ‘semi law-abiding’ – were given fines, as the campaign was used to finance the Korean War. Outside the People’s Bank in Shanghai, a queue 1.5 kilometres long could be seen, as small shopkeepers eagerly sought to sell their few gold possessions to pay the heavy fines imposed on them. The queue was restive, as some had to wait their turn for several days. Eventually the government agreed to accept their gold as a deposit against their debts. The payment was registered on the day of the deposit and no return was allowed. Before long, all the savings of the business and merchant community were appropriated, reducing many to poverty and further undermining the financial structures of the country.<sup>35</sup>

In the spring of 1952 the government quietly attempted to bring the campaign against the bourgeoisie to a close. After May Day, tax burdens were gradually eased, property evaluations reconsidered, fines imposed during the campaign reduced and crippled firms offered low-interest loans. Help was neither unconditional nor universal, as the state could now pick and choose which firms to keep afloat, strengthening its grip on the private sector. The loans came with new conditions, including a 75 per cent share of the profits for the state, while dividends, bonuses and managerial salaries had to come out of the remaining 25 per cent.<sup>36</sup>

It was too little, too late. By March 1952 the entire state system was at a standstill, reeling from months of self-purification. Few cadres were willing to take any decisions – when they were not busy pursuing ideological backsliders and corrupt elements. Everything was referred to the next level up the chain of command in the party hierarchy. Delays became common, apathy was widespread.

Combined with the attack on the bourgeoisie, this resulted in the paralysis of commerce and industry. From managers down to workers, everyone was apparently tied up in denunciation meetings. Industrial output plummeted, trade ground to a halt. In Shanghai goods accumulated uncollected in temporary sheds pitched out in the open. Imported cotton had to be kept on board ships as the millhands were too busy denouncing their owners. In Tianjin, the Number One Cotton Mill worked at only a third of its capacity. Stoppages were everywhere: knitwear production fell by half, and freight transportation plummeted by 40 per cent compared to the months prior to the campaign. In some sectors workers saw their earnings slashed by two-thirds. Banks in the city stopped making loans. Tax income collapsed.<sup>37</sup>

The situation was similar elsewhere. In Zhejiang province, traditionally dominated by trade, the business community lost a third of its capital, with ruinous consequences for the local economy. In the capital Hangzhou, half the profits made in the previous year had to be withdrawn from banks to meet back taxes, refunds and fines imposed for ‘corruption’ – not including a standard tax at 23 per cent as well as other contributions, donations and incentives. Further south, across Guangdong the volume of trade was down by 7 per cent in 1952 compared with the previous year. In some cities, for instance Foshan, famed for its ceramic art, it was down by 28 per cent, in large part due to punitive measures imposed on private business.<sup>38</sup>

Small enterprises could no longer pay their employees. Unemployment rocketed. The number of workers who lost their jobs as a direct consequence of the campaign against the bourgeoisie amounted to 80,000 in Shanghai, 10,000 in Jinan and 10,000 in the region around Suzhou, an old commercial city along the Yangzi where the wealth of its former merchants was displayed in whitewashed houses with dark-grey tiles, stone bridges, ancient pagodas and secluded gardens. In Yangzhou, enriched by centuries of trade in salt, rice and silk, the turmoil caused by the campaign was so great that workers started turning on each other. Further inland, in the city of Wuhan, once described as the Chicago of the East, 24,000 workers lost their jobs as trade dwindled to a mere 30 per cent of its level the previous

quarter. Railway transportation and tax collection came to a standstill. The whole city was a scene of desolation. In Chongqing, Sichuan, 20,000 people were without work thanks to the campaign, and many families had to survive on less than half a kilo of grain a day. Some ate the husks of corn or hunted wild dogs to stave off hunger. Discontent was brewing, with slogans such as 'rebel against the campaign' doing the rounds among disgruntled employees.<sup>39</sup>

The countryside, still linked to the cities through a network of traders, merchants and suppliers, also suffered. In the south, basic items of trade such as oil, tea and tobacco leaves remained uncollected, hurting the farmers who depended on them for their livelihoods. In the region around Shanghai, prices of agricultural goods imploded, robbing the farmers of the capital necessary for spring ploughing. And even if they had enough seeds to plant the next crop, cadres from north to south refused to give any lead, awaiting an official end to the purge inside the ranks. This was true of Jilin, up in Manchuria, where the campaign under Gao Gang was so severe that village leaders spent all their time in meetings, fearful of denunciation as rightists. The fields lay bare. In the south, agriculture also came to a halt in large parts of the countryside. In Jiangshan county, Zhejiang, a mere quarter of all villagers were at work. Most of them just sat back, waiting for orders. And all this occurred, of course, in the middle of the Korean War, when crushing requisitions to feed the soldiers at the front had already reduced large parts of the countryside in Manchuria and Sichuan to man-made starvation.<sup>40</sup>

## Thought Reform

Like pilgrims visiting a holy site, busloads of tourists regularly wander over the yellow loess hills of Yan'an, the heart of the communist revolution. In groups wearing identical tour caps or colour-coded shirts, they file into the cave where Mao once lived and worked, respectfully admiring his spartan, whitewashed bedroom furnished with a bed, a deckchair and a wooden bath. A family portrait hangs on one wall, showing the Chairman with his fourth wife and one of his children. Outside the cave, carved out of the brittle hillside, tourists pose for group photographs.<sup>1</sup>

More than seventy years earlier, tens of thousands of young volunteers had poured into Yan'an to join the communist party. Students, teachers, artists, writers and journalists, they were disenchanted with the nationalists and eager to dedicate their lives to the revolution. Many were so excited after days on the road that they wept when they saw the heights of Yan'an in the distance. Others cheered from the backs of their lorries, singing the 'Internationale' and the Soviet Union's 'Motherland March'. They were full of idealism, embracing liberty, equality, democracy and other liberal values that had become popular in China after the fall of the empire in 1911.

They were quickly disillusioned. Instead of equality, they found a rigid hierarchy. Every organisation had three different kitchens, the best food being reserved for the senior leaders. From the amount of grain, sugar, cooking oil, meat and fruit to the quality of health care and access to information, one's position in the party hierarchy determined everything. Even the quality of tobacco and writing paper varied according to rank. Medicine was scarce for those on the lower rungs of the ladder, although leading cadres had personal doctors and sent their children to Moscow. At the apex of the party stood Mao, who was driven around in the only car in Yan'an and lived in a large mansion with heating especially installed for his comfort.<sup>2</sup>

In February 1942, Mao asked the young volunteers to attack 'dogmatism' and its alleged practitioners, namely his rival Wang Ming and other Soviet-trained leaders. Soon the criticisms that he unleashed went too far. Instead of following the Chairman's cue, several critics expressed discontent with the

way the red capital was run. A young writer called Wang Shiwei, who worked for the *Liberation Daily*, wrote an essay denouncing the arrogance of the ‘big shots’ who were ‘indulging in extremely unnecessary and unjustified perks’, while the sick could not even ‘have a sip of noodle soup’.<sup>3</sup>

After two months, Mao changed tack and angrily condemned Wang Shiwei as a ‘Trotskyist’ (Wang had translated Engels and Trotsky). He also turned against Wang’s supporters, determined to stamp out any lingering influence of free thinking among the young volunteers. Just as the rank and file were investigated in a witch-hunt for spies and undercover agents, they were interrogated in front of large crowds shouting slogans, made to confess in endless indoctrination meetings and forced to denounce each other in a bid to save themselves. Some were locked up in caves, others taken to mock executions. For month after month, life in Yan’an was nothing but a relentless succession of interrogations and rallies, feeding fear, suspicion and betrayal. All communications with areas under nationalist control were cut off, and any attempt to contact the outside world was viewed as evidence of espionage. The pressure was too much for some, as they broke down, lost their minds or committed suicide. Mao demanded absolute loyalty from intellectuals, who had to reform themselves ideologically by continuously studying and discussing essays by him, Stalin and others. When Mao brought the Rectification Campaign to an end in 1945, he apologised for their maltreatment and pointed the finger at his underlings. The victims saw him as their saviour and accepted their own sacrifices during the campaign as an exercise in purification necessary to enter the inner circle. They embraced their mission, ready to save China by serving the party. Wang Shiwei was killed in 1947, reportedly chopped to pieces and thrown into a well.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1949, two months before the People’s Republic was founded, Mao published an editorial entitled ‘Cast Away Illusions, Prepare for Struggle’. He denounced Hu Shi, Qian Mu and Fu Sinian, three leading university professors who had fled south with the nationalists, as ‘running dogs’ of imperialism. He put the educated elite on notice. ‘Part of the intellectuals still want to wait and see,’ he observed. They were ‘middle-of-the-roaders’ who still harboured illusions about ‘democratic individualism’. The Chairman urged them to unite with progressive revolutionary forces.<sup>5</sup>

With liberation, millions of students, teachers, professors, scientists and writers – in communist jargon termed ‘intellectuals’ – found themselves forced to prove their allegiance to the new regime. They were joined by



compatriots who had returned from overseas to answer the call to serve the motherland. Like everybody else, they attended endless indoctrination classes to learn the new orthodoxy, studying official pamphlets, newspapers and textbooks. And like everyone else, they soon had to write their own confessions, making a clean breast of the past by ‘laying their hearts on the table’. They were asked to re-educate themselves, becoming New People willing to serve the New China.

Many did so with relish. For years they had seen the decay and corruption of the nationalist regime, helpless to remedy these, while underground propaganda had done much to portray the party as the only true force for change. ‘You know, for honest young people, the ideals propagated by the communist party were really attractive. Democracy, equality, everybody enjoying the fullest freedom: is there anything more meaningful for a young man than to allow this world to change for the better?’ remembered Cheng Yuan, then a quiet but determined student from a respected family of scholars in Chongqing. His two elder brothers were highly placed officials in the nationalist party, but Cheng had already been won over by an underground cell in high school. A student of physics at Peking University during liberation, he embraced the new learning, plunging into the classics of Marxism to seek self-improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Some viewed the party almost as a surrogate family. Liu Xiaoyu, born in an impoverished and broken home, abused and beaten by her foster parents, was a student at the Ginling Women’s College, a Christian university in Nanjing, when she joined the underground movement. She was never so happy as in the first year of liberation, taking classes in a military school: ‘Many students joined, as we got up together and studied historical materialism and the history of social development. It was a tough life, but in my heart I was happy: this was the new life.’<sup>7</sup>

She was not the only one. Within months the new regime made the study of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought compulsory at all levels, but even senior academics did not wait for the call to set up study groups. Jin Yuelin, a philosopher and logician born in 1895, took the lead by teaching Marxist philosophy at Tsinghua University and taking classes in Russian. He published an article denouncing his own work as the product of a bourgeois mind. Feng Youlan, a leading philosopher trained at Columbia University, boarded a ship back to the motherland in 1948, full of anticipation. So confident was he that the new regime would be a resounding success that on leaving the United States he surrendered his visa, which was valid for life. Back in Beijing he repeatedly distanced himself from his own

landlord background, taking up the study of Marxism with the zeal of a new convert. In July 1949 he opened a conference in Beijing to ‘propagate Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought’. He corresponded with Mao, announcing his determination to reform himself and selflessly serve the new society. ‘It is very good for someone like yourself, who has committed errors in the past,’ answered the Chairman, ‘to be prepared to correct them now, if this can indeed be carried out in practice.’ A month later Feng publicly repudiated his earlier philosophical musings, which spanned several decades. He would spend the next thirty years rewriting his work, constantly trying to conform with the latest dogma.<sup>8</sup>

But Mao was deeply suspicious of educated people, and wanted them to demonstrate their mettle. Book learning was out, practical experience was in (‘only social practice can be the criterion of truth’, the Chairman opined). Already in 1927, when he had compared the peasants to a hurricane, he had hinted that everybody would be put to the test: ‘There are three alternatives. To march at their head and lead them? To trail behind them, gesticulating and criticising? Or to stand in their way and oppose them?’<sup>9</sup>

To prove their commitment to the new order, hundreds of thousands of intellectuals were sent to the countryside as part of the work teams tasked with carrying out land reform. They had to dirty their hands, living and working alongside poor farmers for several months, helping the cadres to make a class analysis of each village. Then they had to bloody their hands, participating in the denunciation meetings during which some of the traditional leaders were accused of being landlords, traitors or tyrants.

For many it was a baptism of fire. Some had never set foot in the countryside, and few had ever spent much time working with their hands – traditionally taboo in a society run by scholars. Liu Yufen, who had just turned twenty at the time and was freshly graduated from a party school, remembered: ‘I visited the poorest home in the village, it had no bed, no sheets or blankets, just an old man wearing old cotton clothes made of rags held together by a few threads. I was completely shaken by seeing such conditions.’ Cut off from all modern amenities, living in rough, cramped huts where whole families huddled together with their livestock, then rising at the crack of dawn to haul manure or dig earth all day long, many experienced culture shock. They overcame it quickly, often through a combination of necessity, fear and conviction, assisted by daily study sessions in which their peers assessed and criticised their performance.<sup>10</sup>

But an even greater challenge was to see revolution in action. Few were prepared for the sheer violence of land distribution, as victims were beaten,

tortured, hanged and sometimes shot. All had to reconcile the huge gap that existed between the propaganda on the one hand and the reality of revolution on the other. They had to steel themselves, silencing the doubts that welled up when they witnessed physical abuse, constantly reciting the vocabulary of class struggle to justify the violence. A vision of communist plenty for all had to be conjured up to see past the squalor of denunciation rallies and organised plunder. They had to convince themselves that they had seen the New World. Some even had to will their hands to stop shaking when they were asked to pull the trigger. A friend of Liu Yufen trembled so violently when ordered to execute a man condemned as a counter-revolutionary that every one of his shots missed its target: the regular soldiers in the execution squad finished the job for him.<sup>11</sup>

By no means all passed the test. Some were courageous enough to criticise the violence of land reform. Several members of the Democratic League, co-opted by the communist party as part of the New Democracy, denounced the random torture and killing that was taking place in the countryside, demanding instead that a court of law should deal with landowners who had committed genuine crimes in the past. Others stressed the need to treat everyone humanely, even victims of land reform. A few queried the notion that every landlord was bad to the bone: ‘There are bad farmers too, who like to eat but shirk work, while some landlords work hard and practise thrift their entire lives.’ But few persisted in such views, which were derided as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘humanist’. When Yue Daiyun, a young woman who had joined the underground movement in Beijing before liberation, tried to protect an old and impoverished tailor from the execution squad, her leader denounced her as a bourgeois sentimentalist who could not take a firm class stance. Unlike others, she failed in her attempt to preserve her own fate through self-deception: ‘I tried to use “class” in order to force myself to look past all sorts of inhuman acts of violence. But I saw how so-called class designations were entirely artificial.’ After the tailor had been shot, she felt pain resembling ‘one half of my body being torn from the other’.<sup>12</sup>

But most decided to ‘march at the head and lead’, in the Chairman’s words. If they wanted a job under the new regime, they had little choice but to become willing accomplices – whether through opportunism, idealism or sheer pragmatism. Many did so with relish. Feng Youlan used the experience to distance himself from his own landlord background and prove his revolutionary credentials. He took a lead in helping farmers outside Beijing confiscate the property of landowners and hailed revolution as a trans-

formative experience. For Wu Jingchao, a sociology professor at Tsinghua University, the most memorable moment of his time in the countryside came when a pauper jumped up from the crowd at a rally, ripped off his shirt and started beating his chest before grabbing a landlord by the collar, angrily waving a finger in his face. Wu enthused about land reform in the *Guangming Daily*: ‘After liberation, we also studied the class viewpoint and the mass viewpoint, but what we learned is nowhere near as profound as a month’s practice.’ Mao approved and wrote to Hu Qiaomu, the head of the propaganda department: ‘This is very well written, please order the *People’s Daily* to reprint it and have the New China News Agency circulate it.’ Wu Jingchao’s career seemed assured.<sup>13</sup>

Many were genuinely filled with anger towards the old order. Zhu Guangqian, already in his fifties and a founding figure in the study of aesthetics in China, could feel hatred flow through his entire body. ‘When I heard a peasant air his grievances against a landlord, the tears streaming down his cheeks, it seemed as if I myself was transformed into that angry peasant, and I really regretted not being able to step forward and give that landlord a good thrashing.’<sup>14</sup>

Some went further. Lin Zhao, a headstrong, idealistic young woman who wrote searing denunciations of government corruption before joining the underground movement in 1948, told her classmate that ‘my hatred for the landlords is the same as my love of the country’. This she demonstrated by ordering a landowner to be placed in a vat of freezing water overnight. She felt ‘cruel happiness’ on hearing the man scream in pain, as this meant that the villagers would no longer be afraid of him. After a dozen victims were executed in the wake of a rally she had helped organise, she looked at each of the corpses, one by one. ‘Seeing them die this way, I felt as proud and happy as the people who had directly suffered under them.’ She was barely twenty.<sup>15</sup>

‘You do not need to be overly anxious about seeing results in haste; you can come around gradually,’ Mao told Feng Youlan in October 1949 after the philosopher had announced his intention to reform himself. But two years later his time was up. As the previous chapter showed, Mao launched a purge of the government and assaulted the business community in the autumn of 1951. He was also ready to expand the model of thought reform, first developed in Yan’an, to the entire country. Willingly or involuntarily, the educated elite were to be regimented and absorbed into the state bureaucracy and have their creative freedom or independent livelihood rooted out.

In October 1951 Mao announced that ‘Thought reform, especially thought reform of the intellectuals, is one of the most important prerequisites for the realisation of democratic reform and industrialisation.’ Shortly afterwards, Zhou Enlai, dressed in a grey woollen Mao suit, lectured 3,000 eminent teachers in the Huairan Hall in the party headquarters at Zhongnanhai. The premier warned them that they were imbued with the ‘mistaken thoughts of the bourgeois class and the petty bourgeoisie’ and must work hard to ‘establish the correct stand, viewpoint and method of the working class’. The lecture lasted a full seven hours. Wu Ningkun, a scientist educated in America who had only just returned to China, against the advice of his brother in Taiwan and his elder sister in Hong Kong, gave up his perfunctory attempt to take notes after a mere hour. ‘Little did I know that the seven-hour report was nothing less than a declaration of war on the mind and integrity of the intelligentsia for the next forty years!’<sup>16</sup>

Before boarding the USS *President Cleveland* for his homebound voyage six weeks earlier, Wu Ningkun asked T. D. Lee, a fellow graduate student who later won the Nobel Prize in physics, why he was not coming home to help the new China. His friend answered with a knowing smile that he did not want to have his brain washed. For Wu and countless others, ideological education now became the norm, as sessions of self-criticism, self-condemnation and self-exposure followed one another, day in, day out, until all resistance was crushed and the individual was broken, ready to serve the collective. As in Yan’an a decade earlier, everyone had to name their relatives and friends, and provide details of their political background, their past activities, their every belief, including their innermost thoughts. Even transitory, fleeting impressions were to be captured and scrutinised, as they often revealed the hidden bourgeois underneath a mask of socialist conformity. All this took place under formidable social pressure, before assembled crowds or in study sessions under strict supervision, as other participants tried to find a chink in the armour of every suspect, grinding him down with a barrage of probing queries.<sup>17</sup>

‘One day we found that the university’s party organization had been suddenly strengthened. A new ruling specified that a member of the party or the Youth League should sit at every table in the dining hall and should occupy a place in every dormitory room. These Communists took notes on the day and night behaviour of every student. Even the words of a student talking in his sleep were recorded and considered for political significance.’ So observed Robert Loh, still working at a university in Shanghai at this time. In Shanghai, in addition to endless group meetings, a lorry was some-

times parked in front of the house of an accused, a loudspeaker pouring out a shrill stream of invective.<sup>18</sup>

Few of those denounced managed to withstand the pressure for more than a few days, frantically writing confession after confession in a desperate search for something the leading cadre would accept. Stubborn teachers who insisted on their innocence were usually locked up in a room and harassed by relays of cadres until a confession was obtained. In Nanjing, teachers and professors were hauled on to a stage, hung up and beaten. Several committed suicide. 'We will crush those who resist,' announced the party secretary of Nanjing, whose report was praised and circulated by Mao. In Chengde, the vast imperial garden city formerly used as the summer residence of the Manchu emperors, some teachers were arrested and killed.<sup>19</sup>

Many tried to atone for their past misdeeds, whether real or imaginary. Jin Yuelin, the logician who took classes in Russian, wrote twelve confessions before he was considered reformed. Feng Youlan, despite all his best efforts, failed to pass the test. Chen Xujing, a leading sociologist with a degree from the University of Illinois, stood in front of the assembled students and staff of Lingnan University and atoned for a full four hours, reduced to tears: he too failed to appease the authorities.<sup>20</sup>

In some cases extremely loyal intellectuals were hounded so fiercely that they became alienated from the party. This too served a purpose, as Loh noted in the case of a colleague called Long:

At first, I considered the Communists stupid for alienating Long. After the betrayal, persecution and humiliation he had received from the Communists, he undoubtedly hated them, and they therefore had turned a valuable pro-Communist into an anti-Communist. Only later did I perceive that the Communists had been fully aware of Long's loyalty to their cause and were equally conscious that after the 'reform' he was disaffected. They had succeeded, however, in terrorizing him so thoroughly that henceforth, regardless of what he thought, he spoke and acted during every waking moment exactly as the Communists wanted. In this state, the Communists felt safer and more secure about him.<sup>21</sup>

Another true believer was Liu Xiaoyu, the young woman who had embraced the communist party as her own family. 'We all felt fear. We stopped speaking even to those with whom we were normally very close. You did not dare speak with others about what was on your mind, even with those close to you, because it was very likely that they would denounce you. Everybody was denouncing others and was denounced by others. Everybody was living in fear.' But what ultimately caused her to lose faith in the party was the unprecedented intrusion into her own private life. She had just married, but was now accused of spending too much time with her husband

instead of devoting herself to revolution. 'There were people who lingered around our home, peeping through the windows and the gap in the front door, trying to find out if we were behaving in an intimate manner. They were supervising us around the clock, and if they saw anything suspect they would report it at a public meeting, making you feel really embarrassed.' She was soon denounced as a servant of imperialism who harboured ulterior motives.<sup>22</sup>

But not everybody was willing to go along. Gao Chongxi, an expert in the chemical industry at Tsinghua University, committed suicide. At the East China Normal University in Shanghai, Li Pingxin was so viciously denounced that he took an axe and tried to chop off his own head. He bled to death. Eileen Chang, on the other hand, was one of the few who would not even buy into the patriotic rhetoric of the new regime. One of the most talented writers in China, she quietly slipped across the border to Hong Kong under a false name in 1952.<sup>23</sup>

Thought reform was by no means confined to elite universities. In Zhejiang the campaign extended to students from middle schools, some aged only twelve: they were ordered to cleanse themselves not only of 'reactionary' views, but also of 'extreme selfishness'. In Guangdong too, middle-school students were mobilised to fight counter-revolutionaries hidden in their ranks. In the Luoding Number One Secondary School, for instance, eighty students were arrested. Up in the north-western provinces, sometimes even children in primary schools were berated for harbouring bourgeois thoughts. Soon any form of insubordination was interpreted as a dangerous sign of individual restiveness to be nipped in the bud. In schools throughout Jiangxi province bullying was so intense that 'student suicides happen incessantly'. In one case a boy suspected of having stolen 15 yuan was put in leg irons and lashed with bamboo whips till he made a full confession. Others were locked up in solitary confinement, a few driven to insanity. Hu Chunfang refused to collect firewood: 'I came to study technology, not to chop wood.' For this impertinence he was dragged off to a denunciation meeting. As his school authorities put it: 'we beat one to scare the many'.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of 1952 virtually every student or teacher was a loyal servant of the state. The food they received depended on their performance. And like all other government employees, they were required to accept any form of employment to which the party directed them. The state needed millions of young people to help build up the border areas such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Manchuria. It also wanted experts to provide technological



advice in the countryside. Thought reform thoroughly crushed any resistance to assignment to a job in a distant and often unappealing place. Socialism lauded the collective, meaning that the government's needs now took precedence over individual preference. On the other hand, young assistants with more reliable political qualifications replaced foreign-trained professors in the cities. Others with degrees from some of the world's best universities were sent to such posts as assistant clerk in a village library or cashier in a district bank. 'None of them received assignments of any real dignity or service,' to quote Robert Loh.<sup>25</sup>

The campaign had the desired result of destroying the unity among intellectuals, removing them from positions of authority and debasing them before the people. It also served another purpose. In early 1952, the higher educational system needed 'readjustment', according to the authorities, which meant that the colleges of various universities were reshuffled and merged. This was intended to disguise the elimination of all Christian universities throughout China. Ginling Women's College, which Liu Xiaoyu had attended years earlier, was merged with University of Nanking. Yenching University, established under the leadership of John Leighton Stuart in Beijing in 1919, was closed. Lingnan University, where Chen Xujing had listed his faults in a mass rally lasting four hours, was incorporated into Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. Years later some of its staff would flee to Hong Kong to establish a liberal arts college with the same name. The whole higher-education system was altered beyond recognition. 'No trace of intellectual prestige remained, nor any of the spirit and tradition which had distinguished one institution from another.'<sup>26</sup>

The pressure did not abate. Almost every year the regime identified a high-profile scholar as a counter-revolutionary, making him the target of vociferous denunciations by the propaganda machine. After Mao had denounced Hu Shi in August 1949, students and teachers were compelled to distance themselves from the liberal essayist, philosopher and diplomat. As a young student in Hunan, Mao had written enthusiastically about him. In 1919, when Mao had worked as an assistant librarian at Peking University, he tried to audit his classes, but Hu Shi would have none of it: 'you are not a student, so get out of here!' Now the Chairman ensured that his work was banned. Hu Shi's own son stepped forward to repudiate his father as a 'reactionary' who had paved the road for capitalism: 'until he returns to the embrace of the people he will always be the people's enemy and also my own enemy'. 'We know, of course, that there is no freedom of speech,' Hu Shi

responded from New York. 'But few persons realise that there is no freedom of silence, either. Residents of a communist state are required to make positive statements of belief and loyalty.'<sup>27</sup>

Liang Shuming was another *bête noire* of the Chairman. Both were born in 1893, but Liang was a brilliant thinker hired at the age of twenty-four by the philosophy department in Peking University when Mao was still an obscure primary-school teacher. A year later, in 1918, the two met briefly at the home of Mao's teacher in Beijing, although Liang paid the Hunanese student little attention. But in 1938, as the philosopher travelled to Yan'an, a composed and polite Mao instantly recalled the meeting: 'A long time ago, we met in 1918 at Peking University where you were the big professor and I was part of the lowly library staff. You probably don't remember that during your frequent visits to Professor Yang's house, it was I who greeted you at the door.' Liang left Yan'an highly impressed, although he did not believe that class theory applied to Chinese society or could solve the country's problems. He maintained an intellectual relationship with Mao, presenting him with copies of his own work. Like others, in 1949 he openly praised the Chairman and embraced the new China. Flattered by the relationship, a year later an amiable Chairman invited him to become a committee member of the Political Consultative Conference. More courtesy visits and pleasantries on the national situation followed, the Chairman on occasion sending his own car to ferry the professor to Zhongnanhai. In September 1950 Mao saw to it that Liang was moved to a private residence near the famous Marble Boat built by the Empress Dowager Cixi in the Summer Palace.

But Liang was no pushover. In 1952, at the height of the attack against private business, he wrote to the Chairman to explain that 'merchants by no means are all dishonest', somehow doubting that they were organised enough to launch a concerted attack on the communist party. In a letter widely circulated to the top leadership, Mao denounced these views as 'absurd'. The relationship cooled. A year later, at a meeting of the Political Consultative Conference, Zhou Enlai encouraged Liang Shuming to speak freely and at length, which he did, deploring the impoverishment of the countryside. Urban workers, Liang argued, 'live in the ninth level of heaven while the peasants dwell in the ninth level of hell'. A few days later, in a long speech occasionally punctuated with biting interjections from Mao himself, an angry Zhou berated Liang for being a reactionary. Liang was stunned into silence. But the following day, as the meeting resumed, he stubbornly tried to defend his position, even threatening to withhold his respect from the Chairman were he denied time to explain himself. A stern

Mao remonstrated with him from the rostrum, but Liang persisted, even asking point-blank if the Chairman himself had the magnanimity to engage in self-criticism. By now people in the audience were screaming for the philosopher's blood. 'Liang, step down from the podium! Stop him from uttering this nonsense!' Still he did not budge. Mao, cool and collected, granted him ten minutes, which Liang thought insufficient. To further uproar from the audience, a vote was somehow decided. The philosopher lost, ending an extraordinary stand-off. A lengthy 'Criticism of Liang Shuming's Reactionary Ideas' appeared later, comprehensively demolishing him as a 'hypocrite' and a 'schemer' – among other things. Mao used a sledgehammer: 'There are two ways of killing people: one is to kill with the gun and the other with the pen. The way which is most artfully disguised and draws no blood is to kill with the pen. That is the kind of murderer you are.' Chiang Kai-shek was the murderer with the gun, standing behind Liang Shuming. The philosopher's career was over. He moved out of his residence in the Summer Palace.<sup>28</sup>

None of these attacks was confined to high politics. Every one of them fuelled a new hunt for real or imagined enemies throughout the education system. In July 1954, for instance, Hu Feng, writer and art theorist, sent a long letter to the party comparing their stultifying theories to knives thrust into the brains of writers. Hu himself, though a Marxist, had never joined the communist party. He had earned the grudging respect of his literary peers in the 1930s for his understanding of the complexities of Marxism, but had also made enemies by acrimonious squabbles over highly abstract and sometimes trivial points of theory. More than once he had unleashed his sharp pen against orthodox followers of the party line like Zhou Yang and Guo Moruo. Even more damaging had been his attack on cultural policy in Yan'an in 1942. The party, he had written, 'wants to strangle literature. It wants literature to take leave of real life and it wants writers to tell lies.'<sup>29</sup>

Twenty years later, some of his enemies had become the powerful enforcers of literary dogma. At a meeting of the Political Consultative Conference in Beijing, the same venue where Liang Shuming had been shouted down a year earlier, Guo Moruo launched a veiled attack on writers who praised 'bourgeois idealism'. Hu picked up the hint and quickly backtracked, writing a self-confession a month later in January 1955. But he was already a man marked for destruction, as the party machine advanced inexorably. Zhou Yang, the high priest of the Propaganda Ministry who had toured the Soviet Union with a large delegation in 1950, personally supervised the campaign against him. In April the *People's Daily* denounced Hu Feng, dis-

missing his self-confession as ‘insincere’ and ‘treacherous’. In the following months a further 2,131 articles taking the writer to task appeared in the press. Incriminatory extracts from private letters Hu had written to some of his friends were published to discredit him further. Mao personally assisted his persecution, not hesitating to stoop so low as to write damning commentaries on the published extracts. In June 1955 Hu was condemned as the head of a counter-revolutionary clique, deprived of all his posts, tried in secret and sentenced to fourteen years’ imprisonment (although he would not be released till 1979).<sup>30</sup>

The hunt was on. A campaign of terror unfolded to root out all his supporters, real or imaginary. Red banners appeared in the cities, declaring: ‘Resolutely, Thoroughly, Completely and Exhaustively Uproot All Hidden Counter-Revolutionaries!’ Wu Ningkun, who had arrived from the United States a mere six weeks before the thought-reform campaign opened in October 1951, by now knew the drill and joined a chorus of denunciation. He despised himself for doing so. ‘I knew the bell was not tolling for Hu Feng and other innocents alone.’ Sure enough, he too was soon confronted at a meeting of more than a hundred faculty and staff members at Nankai University in Tianjin, accused of being the ringleader of a counter-revolutionary gang of four. His house was ransacked, as drawers, suitcases and trunks were turned upside down in the search for weapons and radio transmitters. His letters, notebooks, manuscripts and sundry papers were taken away. One accusation meeting followed another, as his inquisitors took turns to shout abuse and fire questions at him on every aspect of his past, trying to wear him down. His ordeal would last until the summer of 1956.<sup>31</sup>

Encouraged by the publication of letters that Hu Feng and his followers had exchanged, some of the country’s most eminent writers started digging up dirt on each other. Ding Ling had set literary China on fire with iconoclastic short stories in the late 1920s. After she joined the communists in Yan’an, she found herself in hot water for exposing the leadership’s cavalier treatment of women. Mao, for one, had set the tone by abandoning his third wife for younger company. For her impertinence, Ding Ling was sent to labour in the countryside. She had avoided the execution squad by viciously denouncing Wang Shiwei, whom she accused of having stooped to the level of a ‘latrine’. Later she worked hard to atone for her errors, and in 1951 her novel *The Sun Shines over the Sungari River*, a celebration of land reform and its revolutionary violence, won the Stalin Prize for Literature. But the Hu Feng affair cast a shadow over her career, as she had maintained a friendship with the writer since her days in Yan’an. Unavailinglly,

she denounced him, but soon she herself with her former colleague Chen Qixia was attacked for heading a counter-revolutionary clique. Unable to withstand the pressure, Chen confessed to all sorts of imaginary crimes in the hope of shortening his ordeal. Then he handed over all the correspondence he and Ding Ling had exchanged in the previous years, accusing her of attempting 'to seize the leadership of literary circles'.<sup>32</sup>

These were heady confrontations, as leading members of the intelligentsia vied to cast dirt on each other to preserve themselves, but similar incidents occurred among ordinary people across the country. Dan Ling, the young student who had joined a Tiger-Hunting Team in 1952, was now working as a technician in a tank factory in Baotou, a new city being built near the Mongolian Desert. He too participated in meetings denouncing Hu Feng. Like other workers, he was encouraged to expose anyone suspected of sharing Hu's 'bourgeois idealism'. Zhang Ruisheng, one of Dan's close friends and a graduate from Tsinghua University, was among them. One day three plain-clothes policemen turned up at the factory and searched his room. They found nothing incriminating, but a cloud of suspicion continued to hang over him, as he was the son of a wealthy Tianjin capitalist. Soon the factory managers ganged up on him, calling meeting after meeting to denounce him and force him to reveal his 'counter-revolutionary secrets'. In the end, his vehement insistence that he was innocent paid off, and he was cleared after a long investigation.<sup>33</sup>

There were countless similar cases all over the country, as teachers, doctors, engineers and scientists suspected of possessing 'counter-revolutionary' links with 'foreign powers' were persecuted. Luo Ruiqing, who now pitched in as head of security, brought the inquisition to bear upon 85,000 teachers in middle schools. One in ten was purged as a deviant element who sabotaged socialism, plotted against the party or encouraged student unrest. In primary schools the number was double. In total, across the country, over a million people were forced to confront accusations of plotting against the state in 1955, leading to the discovery of 45,000 bad elements. This did not include the arrest of more than 13,500 'counter-revolutionaries' within the ranks of the party. In Hebei alone over 1,000 cliques were uncovered, more than 300 of a counter-revolutionary nature, including an Underground Anti-Communist Alliance, a Free China Team and a Reform Party. In the Hu Feng case, forty-eight 'core members' and 116 'ordinary members' were targets for the secret police across the country.<sup>34</sup>

Thousands committed suicide. Wu Ningkun, arriving at the scene of his daily interrogation one summer morning, discovered his inquisitors chatter-

ing excitedly among themselves. A senior member of the English Faculty had just been found drowned in the decorative pond in front of the library. In Shanghai, Yu Hongmo, the manager of a publishing company, swallowed a large needle in an attempt to kill himself. He lived. Many others became unemployed, tramping about looking for jobs or turning to theft, some of the women even selling their bodies to eke out a living. In the capital alone there were more than 4,000 such cases, including Wang Zhaozheng. A student expelled from Wuhan University, he petitioned the State Council and the Chairman on ten occasions for the right to emigrate to Hong Kong. Then he approached the British embassy, directly threatening to tarnish the reputation of the country. Luo Ruiqing instructed his underlings to crack down on people like Wang and lock them away in the gulag.<sup>35</sup>

With the literary inquisition came a great burning of books. In Shanghai, a total of 237 tonnes of books were destroyed or sold as scrap paper between January and December 1951. The Commercial Press, one of the largest in the country, had roughly 8,000 titles in print in the summer of 1950. A year later a mere 1,234 of these were considered acceptable for circulation. Lectures were given on ‘How We Should Dispose of Bad Books’. Sometimes entire collections were consigned to the flames, as with 17,000 cases of books from the famous anthology of literary masterpieces belonging to Wang Renqiu. In Shantou, one of the treaty ports opened to foreign trade in the nineteenth century, in May 1953 a giant bonfire lasting three days swallowed up 300,000 volumes representing ‘vestiges of the feudal past’. So eager were some cadres in charge of policing culture that they pulped anything they could lay their hands on, including books that were not even included in the black list – which, admittedly, was confusing as the list was endlessly amended. Thus in Beijing even the work of Sun Yat-sen, hailed as the father of the nation by the communist party, was taken off the shelves, while in 1954 the equivalent of a tonne of copies of a French tourist guide to Beijing was recycled. The going rate paid to dealers in second-hand books, a rapidly dwindling trade, was 4 or 5 yuan a kilo. Sometimes students themselves collected suspicious volumes and handed them over to their teachers for destruction, while concerned citizens delivered banned items to their local party office. Pedlars on pavements who continued to sell martial-arts novels or popular love stories were arrested by the dozen in police raids and dispatched to the gulag.<sup>36</sup>

After September 1952, editors and publishers were required to register with the government and submit regular reports. Few classics of the coun-

try's great literary heritage remained in print. The *Book of Odes* was the only one of the thirteen classics of literature that could be obtained, because it was deemed to contain popular chants of ancient times. A few poets, for instance Qu Yuan, who lived in the third century bce, also escaped destruction because they were said to have written 'for the masses'. The central government, which won complete control over the press and publishing houses within a few years of liberation, supervised all such censorship.<sup>37</sup>

Instead readers received a dreary diet of Russian textbooks, translated by the thousand from the end of 1952 onwards, as well as the theoretical productions of the communist leaders, the works of Mao Zedong taking pride of place (severe restrictions on the use of gold were decreed in 1954, but among the exceptions, besides dental fillings, was the use of gilded foils on selected works of the Chairman). The bulk of published material, however, consisted of propaganda work, designed for every conceivable group and every conceivable subject. This included pocket-sized comic books churned out in their tens of millions for children, telling stories of class heroes, imperialist spies, war victories, production records and the building of a new socialist society. Writers working for the party produced a small number of approved works, but their output was minimal. Even those leftist writers who had flocked to the side of the communists – Lao She, Ding Ling, Mao Dun – were no longer in a position to produce the literature of protest that had made their fame before liberation. As one farsighted observer put it, 'The failure of the hundreds of literary lights gathered in Beijing and Shanghai to produce a single work of distinction in the course of five years of communist rule may be an early indication not only that they misunderstood the nature of the communist cause they helped but also that they have been unable to adjust themselves to Mao's rule.'<sup>38</sup>

But most of all, thanks to relentless campaigns of thought reform, people themselves were careful to select reading material that was politically correct. Nobody wanted to run the risk of being infected with bourgeois poison when dreaded struggle sessions were bound to follow. Maria Yen, a student at Peking University, wrote:

Translations of the modern Soviet novelists were safe, of course; we could buy the works of such popular writers as Fadeyev and Simonov. Older masters who had influenced a whole generation of Chinese writers – Turgenev and Dostoevsky and even translations of Gorki – were dismissed as obsolete. In Chinese literature it was all right to read the works of Zhao Shuli, Ding Ling's *The Sun Shines over the Sungari River* and the so-called 'collective productions' of young writers, which were hailed as being rich in 'party traits'. Virtually everything else, including books the Communists had previously praised as 'progressive', was suspect.



This was in 1951, before censorship tightened up.<sup>39</sup>

Still, truly voracious readers managed to survive, often on private collections kept away from prying eyes. Kang Zhengguo, then still a young boy in the ancient capital of Xi'an, had a rebellious streak and was sent to live with his grandparents. The old house, with its whitewashed walls, hardwood floor and delightful jumble of old furnishings, was a treasure trove of all sorts of books, stuffed away in dusty piles in the attic. Kang devoured everything he could get his hands on, from Buddhist sutras and swashbuckling novels to old newspaper clippings pressed between the pages of an oversized edition of *The Thirteen Annotated Classics*. The collection would survive until the advent of the Red Guards in 1966.<sup>40</sup>

The beat of folk drums and the chant of revolutionary song displaced classical music. Records of Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Mozart and other foreign composers seen as bourgeois were quietly put away. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of Mao Zedong's Yan'an talks on literature and art, the entire staff of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing decided in 1952 to debate how best to apply the Chairman's theories to their work, and concluded that musicians must be 'in harmony with concrete reality'. The same year the president of the Shanghai Conservatory – one of the most renowned in Asia before 1949, and a leader in modern music – wrote to the *Liberation Daily* to attack blind worshippers of Western music who thought that 'music need not have ideological content'.<sup>41</sup>

Jazz was so much in demand before liberation that Shanghai was considered the music capital of Asia. Budding players from all over the world, as well as experienced musicians from the United States, performed in the many venues for popular music right up to 1949, but within weeks after the fall of Shanghai nightclubs were boarded up or converted into factories. The regime banned jazz outright, decrying it as degenerate, decadent and bourgeois. Even more in demand, in the decades before liberation, were female singers who incorporated Hollywood songs, jazz orchestration and local folk music into popular tunes. Music by stars such as Zhou Xuan was widely broadcast over the radio and played on the gramophone, only to be denounced as pornographic after 1949. The destruction went further: the great majority of the 80,000 records produced in the era before communism were deposited in a state archive where they deteriorated beyond repair.<sup>42</sup>

Soon ears became attuned to the new music introduced by Soviet cultural delegations. Radios started broadcasting such tunes as 'The Favours of the Communist Party are Too Many to be Told', 'Hymn to Chairman Mao',

‘Song of the New Woman’ and ‘Brother and Sister Plough the Wasteland’. Singing became popular. Unlike solos, which were intolerable expressions of bourgeois individuality, group singing was safe. And it helped spread propaganda, with songs composed for every type of activity. Farmers sang of land reform, workers of labour rights. ‘Soldiers sing while marching or when they stop to rest. Schoolchildren sing a great part of their day. Prisoners sing four hours a day. In all the indoctrination courses for the candidates for government positions, singing takes up three to four hours daily.’ Students gathered in parks on special occasions, singing a strident ‘Song of the New Peasant’ or its equivalent to the accompaniment of drums and gongs. Girls in choirs belted out such catchy tunes as ‘Ten Women Praise their Husbands’. The singing was taught with the same demanding discipline as everything else, with the result that it was often very impressive. Some may not have sung from the heart, but everybody knew the words, as they echoed through city streets and mountain valleys. Children were soon seen singing on their way home, swinging an arm to beat the cadence.<sup>43</sup>

Loudspeakers helped. They seemed to be everywhere, placed at street corners and railway stations, in dormitories, canteens and all major institutions. They often blasted the same tune, as people assembled in the morning for their fifteen minutes of calisthenics. They broke up the day, alternating between political speeches and revolutionary songs as people had their lunch break or made their way back home at the end of their shift. They played more songs in the evening. So widespread and intrusive were loudspeakers that regulations curbing their use after midnight had to be introduced in Beijing, with little effect.<sup>44</sup>

With new songs came new plays, welcomed at least initially by many viewers. Young people in particular did not always care for old-style Chinese opera with its classical plots and extravagant costumes. Maria Yen, like many other students who supported the revolution, rushed to see *The White-Haired Girl*. When the curtain went up she saw the interior of an ordinary farmer’s hut, with realistic, rough furniture, a dab of snow against the papered window. ‘And no lords and ladies with falsetto voices minced out on the stage; instead we found a simple peasant, bent with work and with age, speaking to his young daughter.’ The old father was forced to surrender his daughter into the hands of his rapacious creditor, but was so heartbroken that he hanged himself. ‘Some of us were close to tears as we watched the landlord and his hired bully pull the girl away from the father’s body to carry her back to the landlord’s household. All over the audience we could feel the indignation rise as we watched the girl being beaten and

abused like a slave by the haughty women of the household.’ The plot was simple. The daughter becomes pregnant, and the landlord promises marriage, but sells her to a brothel instead. She escapes and hides in a cave with her baby for two years, her hair growing long and white. The communists liberate the village from the Japanese, and the young girl is finally reunited with one of the guerrilla fighters, a childhood friend she always loved. The landlord stands trial as the peasants shout their verdict: the death penalty. It was a gripping story. The dialogue, singing and acting flowed naturally, creating a spectacle that touched the emotions of many who watched it. The audience burst out in applause as the villainous landlord was dragged off for execution and the curtain came down.<sup>45</sup>

*The White-Haired Girl* was produced as an opera, as a film and also as a ballet. It was performed by professional theatre societies, travelling drama groups, military acting troupes and amateur actors organised in factories, offices, schools, universities and youth clubs. Other plays, for instance Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm*, were endorsed, all following the precise rules and regulations of the Drama Reform Committee, set up by the Ministry of Culture in July 1950. And conversely, anything that smacked even remotely of bourgeois individualism was proscribed. A few foreign playwrights managed to survive – largely thanks to the fact that they were allowed in the Soviet Union. In the case of Shakespeare, for instance, two leading critics from Moscow had concluded that the English bard had exposed the evils of the capitalist system, which paved the way for a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by a theatre school in Beijing in 1956 – something so exceptional in the People’s Republic that it warranted a full review in the *Illustrated London News*.<sup>46</sup>

Theatre was propaganda, and it spread even further thanks to short, simple and very topical plays. Like the rice-sprout songs performed by the dance troupes of the People’s Liberation Army, military actors helped propagate the message by mounting popular plays almost anywhere, in squares, gardens, parks and other public spaces where pedestrians could be corralled to watch and applaud. The plays always addressed the latest government campaign in simple terms easily comprehensible to illiterate farmers, but they became rather predictable. There was always a scene of a soldier placing his foot on the protruding belly of an enemy lying on the ground with legs in the air, whether he was an evil landlord, undercover spy or imperialist exploiter.<sup>47</sup>

Shanghai had been second only to Hollywood in terms of the film industry. But much of it was destroyed in the Second World War, and whatever vestiges remained the new regime swept away. The most popular genres had happily mixed pulp fiction, swashbuckling adventure and comedy with avant-garde techniques to create a celluloid language which was popular all over China. Classical-costume, knight-errant, martial-arts and magic-spirit films attracted even larger audiences, capturing not only millions in China, but many more abroad, since South-east Asia was their biggest market. Hollywood itself was popular. When the communists marched into Shanghai, the Cathay was advertising *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*, a musical film in Technicolor featuring June Haver. None of this was exclusive to the great cities along the coast, since already in the 1930s cinema had penetrated deep into the hinterland. Even in Kunming, a medium-sized city in the subtropical south, half a million people went to see the 166 films shown in 1935.<sup>48</sup>

A campaign against foreign cinema followed within months of liberation. Foreign films were deemed reactionary and decadent, and were ousted by Russian ones – for instance *Lenin in October*, *The Virgin Land* and *The Great Citizens*. Within a year or so hundreds of employees were working at several dubbing centres. Some of the films were well done and inspiring, especially those made before the war (for example *The Battleship Potemkin*), but many were dull, even in the eyes of leftist students. So few people wanted to see them that they were never profitable. In Beijing prices had to be cut several times to attract a crowd. Still the masses stayed away, until the authorities granted the theatre operators permission to show foreign pictures from outside the Soviet Union for five days a month. But the contrast between a full house for reactionary films and the rows of empty seats on days when healthy productions were shown was an embarrassment. A prompt ban resolved the issue. The Korean War brought an end to Hollywood everywhere in the country. In cinema, as in other art forms, the tremendous burst of creativity that was supposed inevitably to follow revolution, as artists were freed from the fetters of feudalism and imperialism, never materialised.<sup>49</sup>

Like every other social group, religious leaders were lured into the embrace of the party by promises of freedom. They were quickly disabused. The pretence of religious freedom was upheld for a year or two after liberation, but the leadership were secretly determined to extirpate all rival belief systems. In February 1951, Hu Qiaomu, who headed the propaganda department, up-

held the Soviet attack on the church as an example for emulation. But as he spoke to his underlings, he warned that it would take time to ferret out all diehard believers.<sup>50</sup>

Buddhism was only loosely organised and therefore made an easy target. Monasteries were destroyed, monks were beaten or killed, copies of the Buddhist canon were burned and sacred images were melted down for their metal. Land was confiscated and Buddhist properties broken up. In some places the clergy was reduced to 'a state of terror', in the words of a contemporary. Some became targets in the vast persecution designed to break the power of traditional elites during land reform. 'In most cases they would strip the clothing from the upper half of a man's body and bind his hands behind his back and his feet too, and then he would kneel facing the masses and confess his crimes,' remembered one monk from a monastery near Nanjing. In the Lingyin Temple, the largest in Hangzhou, a crowd of 4,000 assembled in front of a makeshift platform made of tables piled on to each other. Five monks were forced to face the crowd. The verdict was always the same: 'You see how fat and pretty he is. Why is he so fat? He has been eating the blood and sweat of the people. He is an exploiter, an evil person. Everyone says he should be killed. But the People's Government is magnanimous. It will send him to labour reform.' In the large cities the tone was more subdued, and some of the most devout followers among the elderly were allowed to keep their faith. But no new converts were accepted. In Shanghai, for instance, a quarter of all 2,000 monks and nuns were dispersed by February 1950.<sup>51</sup>

Particularly vulnerable were the country's minorities. The ancient town of Lijiang in Yunnan, crisscrossed by bridges and canals, was dominated by the Nakhi, who had their own language, literature and customs. They built houses that looked deceptively simple, but had delicate patterns on the interiors of casements and doors. Their temples, too, seemed rather plain from the outside, but were richly decorated with carvings on poles, arches and statues of gods. Revolution, in Lijiang, followed the same pattern as elsewhere. 'All the scamps and the village bullies, who had not done a stroke of honest work in their life, suddenly blossomed forth as the accredited members of the Communist Party, and swaggered with special red armbands and badges and the peculiar caps with duckbill visors which seemed to be the hallmark of a Chinese Red,' noted one long-term resident. Old Nakhi dances were prohibited and replaced by the rice-sprout songs which nobody recognised. Learning them after work became compulsory, as did attendance at interminable indoctrination talks at daily meet-

ings. There were continual arrests, often in the dead of night, and secret executions. Local priests were banned. The lamaseries were desecrated, priceless tankas burned or smashed, sutras destroyed and lamas either arrested or scattered. The lamasery halls were converted into popular schools, 'as if there were not enough buildings elsewhere for this purpose'.<sup>52</sup>

Similar scenes occurred all over Yunnan, an ethnically diverse province in the far south-west bordering Burma, Laos and Vietnam. In Kangding county the army occupied several lamaseries. One monastery in Mao county was converted into a prison. Sometimes the local monks and nuns were treated as counter-revolutionaries; some were killed in denunciation meetings. The entire family of a woman selling herbal medicine was put to death. In another case a nun was forced to cut out her tongue. She choked to death on her own blood.<sup>53</sup>

A more inclusive approach was tried after the Great Terror. A Chinese Buddhist Association was formed in Beijing in November 1952. It was a servant of the state. Instead of exhorting its followers to practise quiet contemplation and introspective meditation, it demanded that Buddhists participate in land reform, struggle against counter-revolutionaries and take a lead in the 'Resist America, Aid Korea' campaign. Thought reform was mandatory. Monks, like teachers, professors, engineers or entrepreneurs, had to reform themselves, denounce each other, abandon their 'feudal ideology' and demonstrate their hatred towards class enemies. Gone was the idea of compassion and kindness extended to all living beings without discrimination. And once the monks, too, were civil servants, the Buddhist Association, in 1954, worked hard at discouraging the burning of paper money, celebration of festivals and sacrifices to the spirits. Accepting pious donations was denounced as 'cheating the masses'. Heads of monasteries had to pledge that they would not provide hospitality to travelling monks, who should be engaged in production instead. Deprived of all their traditional sources of income, monks were forced to work, often on plots of poor land. Already in 1951 the monks of Baohua Shan, the most famous ordination centre in central China, 'were suffering virtual starvation – there was not even diluted congee to eat'. In Yunmen Shan the monks had to manage on one meal of thin gruel a day.<sup>54</sup>

Many took the path of least resistance and disrobed. Some became farmers, others joined the army. Sometimes the former monks and nuns continued living at their monasteries, but let their hair grow. A few of them abandoned their vows, married and raised livestock. But the regime kept the decimation of the Buddhist clergy carefully hidden from public view. The

official policy was to claim the same monastic population year after year – half a million in 1950 and still half a million in 1958. But the pressure never abated, and already in 1955 a party official in a secret meeting commended the fact that the number of monks had declined to a mere 100,000.<sup>55</sup>

The same duplicitous approach was adopted towards the buildings themselves. As tens of thousands of monasteries were converted into barracks, prisons, schools, offices or factories, in Beijing vast amounts of money were lavished on the Yonghegong Temple. It stood bright and spotless, its joss sticks smouldering away in their jars of sand, leaving no ash. The conservation work was carried out to support the government's policy towards the border areas. There were 6 million Buddhists in China and another 7 million in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet. And at the heart of Tibet was religion, tightly organised and pervasive. Mao cautioned his colleagues to proceed slowly, as the loyalty of the lamas must first be won over. In total, about a hundred monasteries and pagodas were repaired between 1951 and 1958 – out of the 230,000 places of worship that had monks and nuns in residence before liberation. Some were part of a conservation programme, a few were even protected by law, but most served as showcases for foreign dignitaries. The United States supported Buddhism in South-east Asia, forcing the People's Republic into quiet competition for the allegiance of its religious neighbours. The ever suave Zhou Enlai regularly invited Buddhists from Burma, Ceylon, Japan and India to visit the country's beautifully repaired temples, occasionally offering a relic bone or a tooth of the Buddha in religious ceremonies that would have been decried as the height of superstition under different circumstances.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the atmosphere of regimentation, the party never managed to stamp out popular Buddhism. Villagers continued to turn towards religion in times of hardship. In 1953, following widespread disease and famine in Henan, thousands of pilgrims flocked towards the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, one of the cradles of Buddhism in China. On 25 March 1953 alone, some 20,000 people converged on the temple, queuing quietly to benefit from the healing touch provided by monks. Two years later, Wang Feng, in charge of the Ethnic Affairs Committee, expressed his surprise at the fact that in some cities 'crowds of over 100,000 ceaselessly assemble to worship, pray for rain, burn incense or bow to Buddha'. Much of it was tolerated, as the days of brutal suppression still lay ahead.<sup>57</sup>

No such patience was shown towards Taoism, which had no fellow believers outside China. Taoist belief in magic and divination was decried



as superstition. And because of its association with secret societies in past rebellions, it was also identified as a political threat. Priests, monks and nuns were sent to orientation centres to train as carpenters and seamstresses, while shrines to ancestors and local deities were destroyed. In a village south of Guangzhou, temples were indiscriminately smashed immediately after liberation. Community festivals ceased and sacrificial ceremonies were curtailed; what religious activity was tolerated was driven from public view back into the homes of the villagers. The power of religion to unite and strengthen community bonds was broken.<sup>58</sup>

But the amorphous, scattered and independent nature of many of these millenarian societies continued to bother the regime, as they reappeared under different guises after their dispersal by the authorities. During the Great Terror of 1951 their leaders were ruthlessly persecuted. They seemed to be everywhere. In Hebei the provincial boss estimated that 8 per cent of the population belonged to some cult or another, amounting to some 2 million people. He arrested 3,500 ringleaders within the first few months of 1951. Followers were given a chance to withdraw. In Beijing, according to one observer, more than 100,000 members of the Yiguandao, the Way of Pervading Unity, had apostatised by June 1951. Huanxingdao, Shengxiandao, Baguadao, Xiantiandao, Jiugongdao – there were dozens of popular religious sects and societies that were ruthlessly persecuted. And the pall of superstition seemed to hang with particular weight on people in the south. In the ports along the coastline of Guangdong, up to half the residents apparently followed one cult or another. In Shenzhen, a small fishing village just across the Hong Kong border, nineteen secret societies were counted, the most powerful one being the Yellow Ox Party, whose members were accused of smuggling, robbing and carrying out intelligence work for the enemy. Many were rounded up and executed. But despite all the killings, in 1953 head of security Luo Ruiqing could still list hundreds of leaders in counties from Yunnan, Sichuan and Zhejiang to Anhui.<sup>59</sup>

In the face of repression, people either dropped all visible signs of allegiance or went underground – quite literally. In north China underground chambers were built with tunnels long enough to connect strategic places throughout entire villages. In Shaanxi alone, in 1955 the police uncovered over a hundred subterranean hiding places. In Hebei province, some sectarian leaders took refuge in tunnels for more than four years. In Sichuan the hated Yiguandao did not even have to hide: it flourished to the extent that in 1955 it was recruiting local cadres and members of the militia. In Gansu province, Taoist sects appeared to rule entire regions. And folk religious

practices also had great staying power in other ways. There were endless reports of secret stones, holy water, sacred tombs, magic trees or ancient temples around which village people crowded in times of need, often in the hundreds if not thousands.<sup>60</sup>

Before liberation there were approximately 3 million Catholics and 1 million Protestants. Their faith was singled out for slow strangulation. Brutal persecution, at least in the first years of the new regime, was not compatible with a policy of toleration. But in September 1950, a National Christian Council set up by the communist party issued a *Christian Manifesto* requiring all believers to sever foreign connections. Some termed this a 'Manifesto of Betrayal', but those who refused had to face accusations of aiding and abetting imperialism. Gradually the pressure increased. Cadres and activists questioned believers, at home, in church, at the market place or in the police station, day and night. They were cajoled, threatened, pressed, nagged and prodded, sometimes for days on end. Like all other people in China they were called upon to reform themselves and provide accusations against others. They had to join daily study sessions, examine their links with foreign imperialists and renounce their faith at public meetings. Everywhere religious networks crumbled, as people left the church in droves.<sup>61</sup>

Protestants were further isolated by the rise of a 'Patriotic Church' in 1951. It received funds from the state, preached according to the state and followed every command from the state. Those who refused to join were put under house arrest and sent to labour camps. In parts of the country Christians were forbidden to have rosaries, patron-saint medals or crucifixes. Homes were searched and prayer books, catechisms and holy pictures destroyed. Churches were stripped of sacred objects. Troops carried away altars and benches. Seminaries for training clergy were banned. Zhang Yinxian, a nun in Yunnan, remembers how her church was left empty. 'It used to be so glorious. Overnight, everything was gone. Rats took over the place. We used to have four hundred people working at the church. Only three were left – me, my aunt, and Bishop Liu Hanchen.' All three were ordered out but refused to leave. They were allowed to stay for a few months, but were then taken away by the militia, paraded through the village and put on public trial.

We faced hundreds of villagers with raised fists shouting revolutionary slogans. Some spat at us. Such hatred. As the leader worked up the crowd, a peasant activist came up and slapped Bishop Liu in the face. My aunt stepped forward. 'How dare you slap him.' The activist used to be a poor farmer, and when the Communists confiscated the property of landlords, he was

one of the beneficiaries. He pointed at my aunt and yelled back, 'You are a counter-revolutionary and we have defeated you. You are the lackey of the imperialists who exploited us.' My aunt said, 'We are not. We came from poor families and we've never exploited anybody.' The activists shouted again, 'You are still stubborn and won't admit your defeat. You need to be punished.' Fists were raised and the crowd began chanting, 'Down with the counter-revolutionary nun!' My aunt wouldn't back down. She said to her abuser, 'Slap me if you want. If you slap me on the left side of my face, I will give you the right side too.'

They were compelled to perform hard labour under the supervision of local cadres for many years.<sup>62</sup>

Congregations that had no foreign ties fared just as badly. Mazhuang, a quiet, sleepy Shandong town surrounded by fields of corn and hemp, was the centre of a unique Pentecostal communitarian church called the Jesus Family. Founded in 1927, it consisted of dozens of small communities in which several hundred believers worked and lived together under a family head. Private property was banned, all goods were shared and economically self-sufficient communities followed an egalitarian lifestyle. None of this spared them from persecution. In 1952 their land was confiscated and their followers were dispersed as a 'secret society' with close links to imperialism. Their leader was attacked and thrown into prison. He died in 1957.<sup>63</sup>

Reformed churches, on the other hand, fared better. In Beijing, St Michael's Church had red flags draping the main altar, communion rail, vestibule and the path to the gate. Streamers hanging from the church columns proclaimed 'Long Live Mao Zedong' and 'Long Live Communism'. Portraits of Mao and other leading communists replaced pictures of the Sacred Heart, the Virgin Mary and various saints. Attendance dwindled. Not far away, on Wangfujing, previously known as Morrison Street, the Roman Catholic church had a red star above the cross on its tower. Like the restored Yonghegong Temple, it was a showcase for foreign dignitaries.<sup>64</sup>

By 1954 the number of Catholic believers had been almost halved from 3 million to just over 1.7 million. Where up to 16,000 churches had dotted the religious landscape of China in 1949, a mere 3,252 remained standing. Protestants also proved difficult to crush. Their numbers went down to 638,000, with over 6,700 places of worship still in operation. But despite the denunciations, arrests and deportations, Christianity was hard to stamp out. In some places it even experienced a revival. In Huzhuang, Shandong, over a thousand pilgrims gathered to pray on Easter Sunday in 1955. In Wucheng county, where the church had been converted into a school, some 800 followers erected a tent to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. In the Roman Catholic Diocese of Caozhou, also in Shandong, the faithful had increased by 80 per cent in a year. Some priests addressed their flock in their own

homes. Wang Shiguang, sent out to the countryside, was able to recruit 700 followers. Priests came from places as far away as Beijing and Shaanxi to preach to the poor. Throughout the province, by contrast, believers deserted the Patriotic churches. Some of them stood empty. It was the same story in Sichuan. In Xichang county, priests set out to tend to congregations in distant Chongqing and Chengdu. In Kangding, the church was one of the few buildings spared by an earthquake in 1955. The locals saw this as a sign from God and flocked to mass from all over the county.<sup>65</sup>

The turning point came at the end of 1955, as the party tried to clamp down on all religious activities still outside the fold of the Patriotic Church. As thousands of counter-revolutionary cliques were uncovered in the wake of the Hu Feng affair, a fatal blow was dealt to an already weakened church in Shanghai, described as the ‘Catholic fortress’ of China. On the night of 7 September, the bishop, a mild-mannered but determined man called Ignatius Gong Pinmei, was rounded up along with more than twenty priests and nuns and hundreds of lay Catholics. By the end of November, 1,500 believers had been incarcerated, accused of counter-revolutionary crimes, collusion with imperialism, spreading rumours, poisoning the minds of youth and organising acts of violence – among other crimes. Further arrests took place in Shandong, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Hubei and Sichuan, where counter-revolutionary cliques also operated ‘under the cloak of religion’. Newspaper editorials, cartoons and articles featured attacks on the bishop, as headlines proclaimed that the police had ‘Smashed the Gong Pinmei Counter-Revolutionary Clique’. The bishop was sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>66</sup>

Muslims too were subject to constant humiliation. In Jiangyou, Sichuan, they were lynched and beaten. ‘There is no such thing as a good Muslim,’ proclaimed a party official. In Xindu county, every mosque was confiscated and handed over to the poor. Party secretary Zhu Xijiu organised a team to dig up several thousand Muslim graves and headstones marked with Quranic inscriptions. The stone tablets were used to build granaries and repair dykes. A few ended up as building blocks for pig sheds. In mosques taken over by peasant associations, the mihrab, indicating the direction worshippers should face when praying, was destroyed. The raised platform, normally used by the imam to address his congregation, was turned into a stage for mass meetings. Some of the areas reserved for ritual ablutions were used as female toilets.<sup>67</sup>

Similar abuse was also common across the Muslim belt running through the north-west, and soon open rebellion rocked the region. In parts of Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang shots continued to be heard every night in 1950 despite a strict curfew. Armed rebellions broke out regularly, some of them involving thousands of people and leading to heavy losses in the months following liberation. 'The principal reason for these incidents is the failure to carry out strictly our policy on minorities,' concluded a report on several uprisings in Gansu. In one case more than 2,000 Muslims assaulted the town of Pingliang, where abuse and beatings were described as 'common' and Muslim schools were used to raise pigs.<sup>68</sup>

But few lessons were learned. In another incident a year later a crowd of 8,000 surrounded the county head of Ningding, also in Gansu. Over a thousand people were killed in a bloody showdown, prompted by anger at Chinese domination over a largely Muslim region. The local population was particularly enraged when eight corpses were dumped in the wilderness without proper burial. The bodies belonged to Muslims who had frozen to death in prison. The whole area was terrorised by Chinese militia, who used their power to loot and pillage the Muslims.<sup>69</sup>

Again and again, the government had to bring in government troops to reinforce the local militia, putting to death insurgent leaders responsible for murder, arson, robbery and organised rebellions. A more conciliatory approach towards Islam appeared in 1952. Communist cadres were cautioned to respect Muslim customs. Soldiers were enjoined to refrain from saying the word 'pig' before a Muslim or from washing at Muslim bathing places. Special provisions were designed to leave the land owned by the mosques intact. Muslim leaders who co-operated with the government were used as figureheads for new associations promoting 'patriotic ideological education' – for instance the Chinese Islamic Association organised in Beijing in May 1953.

But, most of all, in 1953 the Muslims living along China's strategic border areas received an empty gift called 'autonomy'. All over China autonomous districts, autonomous counties, autonomous prefectures and autonomous regions appeared for 'minority' people. Xinjiang, where Muslims had long dreamed of a Uighur Republic, was carved up into different portions, for instance the Sibo people near Gulja, the Kazakhs in the north and the Tajik in the Sarikol area of the Pamir mountains. In October 1955 the Uighur presence was formally recognised by naming Xinjiang a Uighur Autonomous Region. But the borders of the 'autonomous' parts of the province were drawn in such a way that no ethnic group could control an

area they dominated numerically. Territories with a relatively homogeneous minority were divided up, while cities and prefectures with large Uighur populations were denied any autonomous status. The Ili Kazakh autonomous prefecture was set up in a region dominated by Uighurs, while Korla was the capital of a Mongol autonomous prefecture mostly populated by Uighurs. It was a predictable strategy of divide and rule, or, to borrow from ancient Chinese tactics, a case of ‘using barbarians to deal with barbarians’. And from top to bottom the party controlled every important decision in these government structures.<sup>70</sup>

Thought reform was less pronounced in these restive borderlands, but nonetheless indoctrination went hand in hand with autonomy. Before liberation the mosques were in charge of education, teaching the Koran and at least enough Arabic for the faithful to understand the religious services. The new regime made great efforts to bring all Muslim children into government schools, where science was taught in Chinese. Special schools were set up in the capital for Muslims, including the Central Institute for Nationalities in 1951, while the Islamic Theological Institute oversaw training for religious leaders. In the Muslim belt, indoctrination of the imams was introduced by 1951, supplemented by reform through labour for obstinate religious leaders. Those who went along, using the pulpit to help propagate the new ideology, became clergymen. They were paid a stipend by the state after the lands, mills, shops, orchards and other belongings of the mosques and madrasas were redistributed, stripping Islamic institutions of their economic independence.<sup>71</sup>

Gradually, as hundreds of thousands of settlers arrived by lorry from the coastal areas to develop the region, Islam receded into the background. The white skullcaps and long jackets, so ubiquitous before 1949, were seen only at times of worship at the mosque, as men and women alike wore the blue and black uniform of the revolution. Visitors from Pakistan noted in 1956 that there were no free newspapers, while most of the libraries contained books devoted largely to communism. All radio sets were tuned to Beijing. It was gradual assimilation. But the real assault on Islam would come only with the Red Guards in 1966.<sup>72</sup>

## The Road to Serfdom

On 30 June 1949, as victory in the civil war seemed assured, Mao announced that China would ‘lean to one side’. Under the leadership of Lenin and Stalin, the Chairman explained, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had built ‘a great and splendid socialist state’. ‘The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is our best teacher and we must learn from it,’ he continued. And in the Soviet Union, farming had been collectivised to serve the needs of industry. China would be no different. ‘Without socialisation of agriculture, there can be no complete, consolidated socialism.’ Judging by the Soviet Union’s experience, Mao added, this would require ‘a long time and painstaking work’.<sup>1</sup>

The work would be painstaking indeed, but the road to collectivisation took much less time than anybody could have anticipated.<sup>2</sup> This road was taken out of necessity as much as by choice as soon as land reform came to an end. Once the villagers all had a roughly equal share of the land, there were not enough animals and tools to go around. Before land distribution, farming was a full-time occupation for some people, but only an avocation for others. And even then, a fully occupied farmer seldom had more than one working animal and a small set of farming equipment. The further one went south, the more acute the problem became, as population density increased. The archives offer examples of stark warnings of the consequences of land reform. From Yichang, a transportation hub along the Yangzi River in Hubei, came a message from the party headquarters explaining that the land was no good to the poor, as they lacked cows, tools, seed, fertiliser and even sufficient food simply to survive the spring season. The problem was ‘widespread’, but it was particularly pressing in areas where land had just been redistributed. ‘This year the outlook for poor peasants and farm labourers truly bears no reason for optimism. Their productivity cannot be increased, their lives cannot be changed.’ Collectivisation seemed the only way forward.<sup>3</sup>

In many places villagers started sharing ploughing animals and tools among several families after they had received a plot of land. The owners were rarely enthusiastic about their common use, since no one but themselves would take good care of them. So at village meetings local cadres nudged them along the



path to collectivisation. A platform would be hastily erected, decorated for the occasion with red flags and pictures of Chinese and Soviet leaders. In one case an agricultural expert rambled on for hours. The key message was somewhere towards the end, catching the attention of the villagers. 'Since there is a shortage of ploughing animals and tools,' the man shouted, 'it has been decreed that you may borrow your neighbours' animals and tools. The local government will see to it that nobody refuses to share these things with his neighbours.'<sup>4</sup>

This was the first stage of collectivisation. Families who shared tools, working animals and labour were called 'mutual-aid teams'. Not much of the aid was mutual. While in the past it had been common to pool together during busy seasons, the farmers had done so voluntarily, not under threat of denunciation by local cadres. Villagers who refused to go along with collectivisation ran the risk of being called 'unpatriotic', 'Chiang Kai-shek roaders' or 'backward elements'. In some cases cultivators who preferred to remain independent had strips of paper pinned on their backs, denouncing them as 'capitalists' or 'go-it-aloners'. In Yuechi county, Sichuan, a local cadre forced a villager to hang a board around his neck reading 'lazy-bones'. Another was humiliated with a sign of the tortoise, a graphic metaphor for the penis. Not far away, in Guang'an, another villager who preferred to cultivate the land on his own was forced to walk the streets beating a gong, warning onlookers: 'Do not follow my example, you should not refuse to join the mutual-aid teams!' At least in one village in the same region villagers were given a choice. The local leader displayed two posters, one pledging allegiance to Mao Zedong, the other to Chiang Kai-shek: each villager was asked to sign up for the leader of his choice. But most of all, those who refused to share were deprived of the loans they needed to tide them over.<sup>5</sup>

New conflicts appeared, even though all grudges were supposed to have been settled with the revolutionary righteousness of land reform. The working animals that had not been killed during land distribution were now borrowed, and many of them were badly neglected. When they were returned to their owners they were often miserable, sick and filthy. Some were worked to death. When, on the subtropical island of Hainan, water buffaloes were passed around the village instead of being returned at the agreed date, the owner had to plant his rice without first ploughing the land, resulting in stems with pale ears that bore no rice. When boats were borrowed for two weeks they were never returned, prompting others in turn to be more cautious with property. Some pretended that their vessels were not seaworthy,

others preferred to fill them with river mud rather than to lend them out. Farming tools, to be shared by mutual-aid teams, were often broken, due either to neglect or to sheer spite. Conflicts between those who lent and those who borrowed soon undermined the very notion of private property. The poor proclaimed that 'it is glorious to be poor', pushing for the equal distribution of all assets: 'if there is food all should eat it, if there is money all should use it'. Fear and jealousy meant that poverty became the norm.<sup>6</sup>

The very term 'rich' inspired dread. In some cases the poor pushed for much more radical sharing, anticipating the People's Communes that would come with the Great Leap Forward in the summer of 1958: everything was pooled together, no matter what each person contributed. In some places in Hainan as many as 6 per cent of all teams practised this form of radical egalitarianism. In one extreme example a team of five families even shared the cost of weddings. But in a fateful anticipation of the famine that followed the Great Leap Forward, those who could not contribute as much as others were soon marginalised. Pregnant women were cursed for eating from the common pot without working in the fields. Farmers were reluctant to go to market for fear of being denounced as slackers. With the blurring of private property, theft also became more common. As one report noted, 'social order is abnormal', as entire villages sank into a form of open anarchy where every bit of property became fair game.<sup>7</sup>

Hainan had been the last place to be liberated, Manchuria the first. In Manchuria too the introduction of mutual-aid teams impoverished the countryside – often before the rest of the country. Farmers slaughtered their cattle before they had to share them. Good horses were traded for old nags, carts with rubber tyres bartered for antiquated ones with wooden wheels. The trend started in the spring of 1950. Less than a year later, a third of the countryside was in dire poverty, lacking working animals, food, fodder and tools. Sometimes there was not enough seed to plant the next crop. And even with sufficient seed, the job was badly carried out with sprouts distributed unevenly over the fields. As a report to the People's Congress noted, 'the masses lack enthusiasm'.<sup>8</sup>

Other problems appeared. Land distribution was supposed to have confined the most glaring inequities to the past, freeing the productive potential of the masses from the dead hand of feudalism. But all over the country transactions in land appeared as soon as it had been redistributed. In 1952 poor farmers sold or exchanged parts of their share in Zhejiang province. In one village in Jiande county alone, half the land passed through different hands, sometimes sold to rich farmers and city merchants. In the Jinhua re-

gion up to 7 per cent of the redistributed land was rented out at an average rate of 20 per cent of the estimated yearly yield.<sup>9</sup>

The situation was similar elsewhere. In Langzhong county, Sichuan, up to one in six of all farmers were driven by sheer destitution to sell their parcel, reversing the land reform that had taken place a year or so earlier. Some could not even afford the land tax. Land distribution was also supposed to bring to light all the holdings previously hidden from tax inspectors. But in large parts of Jiangsu and Anhui – among other provinces – many plots remained untaxed. Called ‘black land’, it reached an extraordinary 70 per cent of the overall surface in one district of Qiaocheng, Anhui. Sometimes farmers and cadres colluded in hiding the best plots or turning prime ground into wasteland in the land register. As one village head boldly proclaimed while pacing the fields with a measuring tape in Suxian county, Anhui, ‘measuring the land is all about deceiving those above us and helping those below us’. But more often than not, the beneficiaries of ‘black land’ were the local cadres, who now lorded it over the commoners – as was the case in Jilin province. By one rough estimate, produced by the highest echelon of power in charge of several provinces, roughly half of all local cadres were corrupt. In some regions a new elite had emerged, as one in ten families headed by party officials lived like rich farmers, hiring labour, charging high interest rates and speculating in land.<sup>10</sup>

Everybody had received a plot of land, so everyone had to pay tax – in the form of grain. But before liberation not every villager was a farmer, and even those who tilled the fields often had sideline occupations, making handicrafts in their spare time to supplement the family’s income. In some regions entire villages specialised in producing paper umbrellas, cloth shoes, silk hats, rattan chairs, wicker creels or twig baskets for the market. Much of this handicraft wealth was squeezed out by the new regime or forced into mutual-aid teams. Before the revolution, blacksmiths would camp near the hot-water shops or public mills of a village, their furnaces resounding with the blows of the hammer on the anvil as they worked with recycled iron to provide cultivators with agricultural tools. Now many of them worked in teams under the watchful eye of the state. In Huili, Sichuan, the weight of hoes and rakes doubled under collectivisation. The quality was so poor that in some cases the tools had to be discarded after a day or two of use in the fields.<sup>11</sup>

Entire industries in the countryside were wiped out. A good example is what happened in Xiaoshan, an affluent county in Zhejiang where over half the local people relied on the craft of paper-making for an income. The pro-

fession demanded special skills, passed on from generation to generation, as hemp, ramie, mulberry and bamboo had to be soaked, pounded and washed to retrieve the long fibres, which were then cleaned in a lime solution and pressed into sheets. Within a year of liberation the industry was taxed out of existence, as fewer than a quarter of 200 small factories managed to remain in business. A once thriving population was reduced to digging up bamboo shoots, cutting grass and stealing wood to eke out a living. Xiaoshan was by no means exceptional, as private enterprise was denounced as a bourgeois pursuit throughout the country. In all of Hubei province, by 1951, the income that most people in the countryside obtained from secondary occupations was cut in half compared to earlier years. More than ever before, the villagers relied on agriculture. In many provinces the output of sideline occupations in the countryside would not match pre-war levels until the 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

But as an ever greater proportion of villagers were funnelled into agriculture, the actual amount produced per person declined after the redistribution of land. Work teams dispatched by the Committee on Land Reform reported that entire counties in Hubei plunged into starvation. There were numerous reasons for widespread hunger, but most were man-made. Cadres who hailed from the north issued orders while ignoring the conditions of the local economy. Villagers were locked up in meetings all night long. Animals starved to death. Tools were lacking. In some villages four out of five residents had no food to eat. Lending had come to a complete halt, as everybody feared being stigmatised as an 'exploiter'. The poor had nowhere to go, as charitable institutions from the old regime had been disbanded.<sup>13</sup>

Famine stalked large swathes of the countryside in 1953. In the spring, 3 million people in Shandong went hungry. Five million people were destitute in Henan, close to 7 million in Hubei and another 7 million in Anhui. In Guangdong over a quarter of a million people went without food. In Shaanxi and Gansu over 1.5 million people went hungry. In Guizhou and Sichuan desperate farmers sold the seeds on which their next crop depended: this was the case with a quarter of the people in some villages in Nanchong county. The practice was also common in Hunan, Hubei and Jiangsu. In Shaoyang county, Hunan, starvation compelled even farmers who used to be well off in the past to sell everything they had. In many of these provinces desperate parents even bartered their children. Villagers were reduced to eating bark, leaves, roots and mud. Famine was a familiar challenge in traditional China, and natural disasters were responsible for a good

deal of this hunger. The year of Stalin's death saw floods, typhoons, frosts and blights on an unprecedented scale.<sup>14</sup>

But many reports also pointed the finger at brutal grain levies as well as incompetence, if not callous indifference, on the part of local cadres. In Shandong, each villager had to subsist on roughly 20 kilos of grain a month in 1952. In terms of calories, 23 to 26 kilos of unhusked grain are required each month to provide 1,700 to 1,900 calories per day, an amount international aid organisations consider to be the bare minimum for subsistence. Fodder, seed and other necessities had to be taken out of this amount, meaning that farmers had to live on a mere 163 kilos per year, or less than 14 kilos a month. The state reduced this amount to 122 kilos in 1953, the equivalent of a starvation diet at just over 10 kilos a month. And Shandong was hardly an isolated example. In Jilin, as Chapter 7 showed, brutal grain levies during the Korean War caused widespread famine in 1952. That year, the farmers were left with an average of 194 kilos a year. But the rate of procurement went up from 42.5 per cent to 43.8 per cent in 1953, further reducing the share for each village to a mere 175 kilos, equivalent to less than 15 kilos a month: that, too, was a starvation diet, barely supplemented by a few occasional greens. These are telling figures, even if they do not always capture the human dimensions of hunger. In Nanhe, a dust-swept county on the barren plain of Hebei, the number of children sold out of sheer destitution increased inexorably after 1950: eight children in 1951, fifteen the following year and twenty-nine by 1953. The party archives are silent about the heart-wrenching decisions that impoverished families must have reached in trading their offspring for a handful of grain, but they do mention the local cadres: they stood by as lenders exacted extortionate rates of up to 13 per cent per month. And sometimes they joined the fray, throwing their weight around to impose even higher rates.<sup>15</sup>

The party had an answer to all these problems, and it was to travel further down the road to collectivisation. Speculators, hoarders, kulaks and capitalists were blamed for all the trouble – despite years of organised terror against counter-revolutionaries and other enemies of the socialist order. More rather than less state power was seen as the solution. Starting in 1953, the mutual-aid teams were turned into co-operatives. Tools, working animals and labour were now shared on a permanent basis. Villagers retained nominal ownership of their plot but secured a share in the co-operative by staking it along with those of other members in a common land pool. The

co-operatives soon overshadowed the entire lives of the villagers, selling seed, salt and fertiliser, lending money, fixing the prices, determining the time of the harvest and buying up the crops.

This second stage of collectivisation was also supposed to be voluntary, although by now the grip of cadres and the militia on the countryside was such that no realistic alternatives existed. This time around many villagers went even further in trying to withhold their possessions from the communes. As one report noted, it was ‘very common’ for villagers to abandon years of frugality and slaughter their animals. One couple managed to devour a 50-kilo hog all on their own, not saving any of the meat. Up in Jilin – to take a different example – Sun Fengshan killed his pig in the hope of keeping it from the state’s reach, but lacked any facilities to freeze and store the meat. Much of it was eaten at night by dogs, leaving his family crying at the loss. Instead of borrowing from each other, people now turned to the state – with no intention of repayment. The poor were often at the vanguard of collectivisation. In Yangjiang, they accepted state grain while openly declaring that none of it would ever be returned. One man who carted away 1,500 kilos of rice was asked how he would ever be able to reimburse his loan. ‘In a year or two we will have socialism and I won’t pay back shit’ was his answer.<sup>16</sup>

Traditional village rights and customs were neglected or destroyed. There was a scramble over common resources that had not been confiscated and redistributed with land reform, for instance pastures, moorlands or salt marshes where animals were allowed to graze, or riverbanks and woodlands where children collected firewood. People tried to grab what they could before the state collectivised everything. In Huaxian county, Guangdong, a crowd of 200 fought over the forest, resulting in many injuries. In Maoming a village organised a team of 300 to cut down the trees belonging to a neighbouring hamlet. Disputes also flared up over rivers and ponds, creating ‘a tense and insecure situation in the countryside’.<sup>17</sup>

The amount of land under cultivation decreased with the introduction of co-operatives. People pooled their plots, but large tracts were abandoned because their owners were compensated with so few shares that it was not worth the trouble. In Jilin province 40,000–50,000 hectares of farmland were cast aside during the first phase of co-operativisation. Even carefully cultivated fields fell into neglect. Explained Wang Zixiang, a farmer in Sichuan, who allowed his terraced field to collapse to the ground: ‘Why repair it when it will soon revert to the collective?’<sup>18</sup>

Despite popular resistance, expressed by slaughtering cattle, hiding or destroying assets and slacking at work, the speed with which villages were transformed into co-operatives was stunning. It was driven by political imperatives, as party officials of all levels were keen to take a lead, hoping to be rewarded by a good word from the Chairman. In Jilin province, for instance, fewer than 6 per cent of all farmers belonged to a co-operative in 1953. A year later a third had been enrolled, causing what one report referred to as ‘chaos’. Everywhere cadres forced farmers into co-operatives. In 1953 there were only about 100,000 of them. By 1955 more than 600,000 were spread across the country, locking in 40 per cent of all villagers.<sup>19</sup>

The most damaging change to the countryside was the introduction of a monopoly on grain by the end of 1953. The state decreed that cultivators must sell all surplus grain to the state at prices determined by the state and in co-operatives run by the state. This was the third stage of collectivisation.

The aim behind this momentous shift was to stabilise the price of grain across the country, eliminate speculation and guarantee the grain needed to feed the urban population and fuel industrial expansion. As famine spread in 1953, the state discovered that private merchants spiked the price of food. They hoarded rice and wheat in the hope of making a higher profit. It was a phenomenon common in all agrarian societies in times of crisis, but in this case the situation was made worse by the existence of co-operatives. Not only did farmers slaughter their cattle in defiance of collectivisation, but they also hid their grain. And when they went to market to sell their crop, they often preferred to turn to private merchants rather than to the state co-operatives charged with collecting the crop. The co-operatives adhered rigidly to a set of opening hours which took no account of farmers’ working schedules, whereas private shops welcomed customers at any time of day. The co-operatives themselves did such a poor job that many preferred to delegate the task to independent grain traders. Everywhere, it seemed to the leadership, capitalist practices were subverting the socialisation of the countryside.<sup>20</sup>

Private merchants, of course, were a convenient scapegoat for the famine. There was another, more pressing reason why the state introduced a monopoly on grain. The reality was that the economy was a disaster. Land reform had failed to usher the country into an era of prosperity. Trade was in dire straits. The state was running a huge deficit, with its expenditure twice as



big as its income. When the leaders convened in July 1953 to scrutinise the finances, they were staring at a black hole of 2.4 billion yuan.<sup>21</sup>

One cause of the deficit was foreign trade. Since Beijing dramatically oriented its exports away from the West towards the Soviet Union, it had become dependent on Stalin to earn foreign currency. China tried relentlessly to sell more goods to its reluctant partner. By the admission of the leaders responsible for foreign trade, they constantly pestered and harassed their Soviet counterparts. But in 1953 the Soviet Union only took 81 per cent of a proposed list of items for export, falling far short of expectations.<sup>22</sup>

To add insult to injury, Stalin sharply reduced the amount of aid he was willing to commit to China's first Five-Year Plan, due to begin in 1953. When Zhou Enlai met the Soviet boss in September 1952, he asked for a loan of 4 billion rubles. Stalin replied that the Soviet Union 'will have to give something, although the exact amount must be calculated. We cannot give 4 billion.' And Stalin made numerous demands in return, asking, for instance, for large amounts of natural rubber – 'at least 15,000 to 20,000 tonnes each year'. When Zhou demurred, Stalin threatened to cut the number of lorries that China had requested. He wanted more rare-earth metals, including lead, tungsten, tin and antimony. And he insisted on foreign currency to cover the costs of the trade imbalance between China and the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

This meeting was followed by endless others, as Li Fuchun, a bookish man with a self-effacing air who was in charge of the negotiations, spent ten months in Moscow bickering and wrangling for more concessions. Stalin died in March 1953, but he and his successors forced Beijing to accept deep cuts. The rate of growth that China wanted to pursue, Stalin said, was 'rash': he cut it from 20 per cent down to 15 per cent. He reduced the number of industrial complexes built with Soviet assistance from 150 to 91. He vetoed several projects related to military defence. As Li put it, 'We just asked for everything we wanted, and we wanted too much, too fast.' Mao and his colleagues had little choice but to accept a watered-down deal in June 1953.<sup>24</sup>

A few weeks later, Mao asked the Financial Committee to come up with ways of requisitioning more grain. Chen Yun, Bo Yibo and others had already proposed a state monopoly on grain in 1951, but abandoned it after local cadres warned that any attempt to curtail the freedom of farmers to sell their crop in local markets would provoke a backlash. But now the time seemed right. A few leaders still voiced reservations. Deng Zihui, the regional boss of south China who was now in charge of a powerful committee

on agriculture, queried the wisdom of taking food without any exemption from those interior provinces where the soil was poor, saline or infertile. Even Chen Yun, one of the architects of the earlier plan, warned of rebellions. But he too sided with Mao.<sup>25</sup>

The grain monopoly was imposed in November 1953. The system worked as follows. The government estimated what the yield per hectare of any given field would be. This figure was often much higher than the actual yield, and it was sometimes raised again under pressure to produce more. The government also determined the quantity of grain that each person should eat. This was set at roughly 13 to 16 kilos per head each month – a little more than half the required amount of unhusked grain to provide 1,700 to 1,900 calories per day. It was a starvation diet imposed equally on all villagers. This amount, as well as the land tax and the seeds required for the next sowing, was deducted from the estimated yield. What remained was considered surplus. It had to be sold to the state at a price fixed by the state. Extra grain above the basic ration could be bought back from the state by the farmers – if they could afford it, and if there was any grain left after it had been used to feed the cities, fuel industrialisation and pay off foreign debts.

The leadership knew full well that taking control of the harvest was tantamount to declaring war on the countryside. It was so reminiscent of what the Japanese had done in north China during the Second World War that the party leaders agreed to avoid the term ‘procurement’. They used a euphemism instead, calling the monopoly a ‘unified sale and purchase system’ (*tonggou tongxiao*). Among themselves they talked of a ‘yellow bomb’, knowing that villagers would resist and fight the system. But they preferred it to the only other alternative they could envisage, namely a ‘black bomb’, as grain merchants would continue to exploit the market to their own advantage as long as no monopoly was imposed.<sup>26</sup>

The yellow bomb destroyed the very foundations of village life in China, turning a great proportion of the cultivators into bonded servants of the state. Everywhere there was resistance fuelled by rage against the party, most of it covert, but some of it public. Even some local leaders preferred to side with the villagers, whether out of strategic calculation or genuine concern over their welfare. In parts of Guangdong up to a third of the cadres helped farmers to hide their grain. Public village meetings were held in Zijin to devise ways of holding back some of the food from the grain inspectors. Open resistance was common. In Zhongshan county, not far from

Macau, eighteen villages protested for four consecutive days against the grain monopoly. Arson and murder were rife.<sup>27</sup>

In Jiangxi province some villagers invited themselves into the homes of the cadres, searched the premises and then heartily tucked into the food, leaving behind a token payment in exchange for the meal: 'In the past, when you were working, you came to my house for a meal and you gave me 0.10 yuan, so now I too give you 0.10 yuan.' Others took seats and refused to budge, occupying the homes of party officials they disliked. Leaflets appeared seemingly out of nowhere, calling on people to resist state procurements. Bemused grain inspectors came upon teams of children roaming the countryside, loudly cursing Chairman Mao and the government.<sup>28</sup>

Harking back to a form of resistance that had appeared in 1950, groups of villagers blocked cargo boats in Hubei, adamant that grain should be used to feed the people who had actually produced it. In one village the women took a lead, as a hundred of them blocked access to the local granary. Elsewhere, 300 women armed with sticks and stones cut off access to the cargo boats. A few hurled pots filled with urine towards the agents of the state. In Sichuan, banners and tracts denouncing grain requisitions were unfurled. 'Down with Mao Zedong!' or 'Resolutely Eliminate the People's Liberation Army' appeared by roadsides in Hanyuan and Xichang, while elsewhere popular ditties mocked the party.<sup>29</sup>

The state responded with more violence. As the militia dragged away the grain, some of the poor would break down in tears, crying for fear of hunger. Those who resisted, or failed to meet their quota, were beaten. It was 'common', the state Bureau for Grain reported from Guangdong, for recalcitrant elements to be stripped and left standing in the cold for hours on end. All over the province thousands of people were locked up for refusing to sell their grain. Up in the north, in Baoding, Hebei, there were scenes of chaos when the procurement teams entered the village. People hid in the toilets, others pretended to be sick, a few coming out to hurl abuse at the cadres, only to be beaten, some of the elderly women wailing in despair and fear. In the Handan region, cadres were blunt: 'if you don't report your excess grain, we will stop sales [of edible oil, salt and other basic items] for ten days'. In twenty-four villages in Yuanshi county, just south of Shijiazhuang, villagers were spat upon, pushed around, tied up and beaten in order to force them to produce the grain. A subsequent investigation revealed that in Yuanshi, violence was used in over half of all the 208 villages. The cadres used torture techniques learned during earlier campaigns. A few openly dismissed the villagers as mere 'slaves'. Mock

executions were held, while one pregnant woman was beaten unconscious. Even children were forced to stand upright for hours on end, a form of punishment that was apparently 'very common'. Suicides were described as 'ceaseless'.<sup>30</sup>

Sometimes pitched battles occurred between the people and the security forces. Luo Ruiqing, the head of security, counted dozens of cases of unrest and open rebellion in the countryside. In Zhongshan county, Guangdong, thousands of villagers rebelled in early 1955 and demanded an end to the grain monopoly. Four companies of public security forces were sent in to quell the unrest. People were killed on both sides of a bloody battle that lasted several days. In the end 300 farmers were dragged away to prison. In Luding, Sichuan, a sacred place in revolutionary mythology where the communists had battled the nationalists over the only suspension bridge spanning the torrential Dadu River in 1935, six riots were reported in a single month. In Miyi, also in Sichuan, people from ten villages seized weapons from the militia and converged on the party headquarters. Until the archives fully open, there is no way of knowing how many people were crushed by the state machinery during these uneven confrontations.<sup>31</sup>

On a few occasions the state had to give in. In parts of Gansu dominated by the Tibetans – Xiahe, Zhuoni and other counties – procurements came to a complete halt after several regional leaders were shot dead in an ambush. The region was rife with rumours of rebellion. 'Better rebel than wait for death through starvation' was one slogan that made the rounds. The party was compelled to fall back, ordering that a steady supply of grain be guaranteed to Tibetans throughout the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan.<sup>32</sup>

But outside politically sensitive areas the pressure was relentless. Rather predictably, even the basic survival ration that the system was supposed to leave untouched sometimes vanished, leaving villagers with nothing to eat. In Qingyuan, Guangdong, all but two members of an entire co-operative were forced to sell all their food. Sometimes party secretaries took a lead in allowing the state to seize every last kernel of grain. Qiu Sen, a member of a public security committee, sold almost 500 kilos, leaving him and his family of five a mere 110 kilos, barely enough to feed them for two months. And as the situation slipped out of control, some local authorities started reducing the amount of grain that could be sold back to the villagers. They often discriminated against the black classes, those outcasts labelled during land reform as 'landlords', 'rich farmers' and 'counter-revolutionaries'. In Yangjiang nobody classified as a landlord was sold any grain at

all, whether they had enough to eat or not (they often did not, because their land had been redistributed and their assets confiscated). In Deqing even farmers classified as ‘middle peasants’ were barred from buying grain, regardless of their actual circumstances. In Hainan grain was sold only if a village had suffered from ‘shortages’ for a period of at least three months. In Fengcheng, Jiangxi province, cadres pledged to sell grain only to those households who fulfilled their procurement quota.<sup>33</sup>

It was not sufficient to collect the grain. It had to be sieved, winnowed, cleaned, milled, stored, transported and sold. Common enemies were birds, rats, weevil or mildew, which had to be kept at bay. Grain had to be dry or it would rot. The most simple containers were wicker baskets, and they were made in a great variety of shapes and sizes. Earthenware jars were used for hulled grain. Granaries also existed, although before liberation most of the grain was consumed where it was produced, meaning that few large storage facilities were needed. The grain could be stored in round bins built of straw and clay, often on a cement or sandrock floor to keep out rodents and ground moisture. More common were burlap sacks, stacked up in a granary or in a simple tarpaulin shed. In Shaanxi caves were sometimes used, while on the loess plateau in the north the grain was sunk into pits lined with wooden boards, dug up to 12 metres deep with a floor of tamped earth. Whatever means had been devised to store the crop, there was one constant: people looked after it because their livelihoods depended on it.<sup>34</sup>

Now the state took over, and at great expense. The farmers, pedlars, handlers, traders, millers and others who had made a profession out of looking after the grain were pushed aside as so many speculators and capitalists. And not only did state employees increasingly look after the grain, but they also had to expand the volume of storage dramatically. Even when grain was kept for local consumption, the monopoly mandated that farmers sell it first to the state, which could sell it back to them later if they could afford it. Not surprisingly, the state suffered from a shortage of storage facilities that would last for decades. The cost was prohibitive. In 1956, according to one expert, ‘the costs to the state of storing grain for more than three years were equal to the value of the grain itself’.<sup>35</sup>

As larger state-controlled concerns replaced small, individual or family-run facilities, many of the perennial problems that had plagued grain storage spiralled out of control. In January 1954, for instance, every province in east China reported a large increase in food that was overheating and becoming damp. In Shanghai alone 40,000 tonnes developed mildew. The prob-

lem was compounded by local cadres, who cared more about quantity than quality: their job was to demonstrate to their superiors how much they had procured, not how well they performed this task. In some cases they deliberately allowed high humidity to increase the overall weight. A few even bulked up the volume by adding water. Here is the scene that met one visitor when the doors of a warehouse opened in south China:

Moths and beetles swarmed out, and I saw several rats as big as young rabbits scurrying across the floor. Different kinds of containers were haphazardly stacked on the slab-stone floor. There were also torn sacks of various sizes, along with earthenware jars and wooden casks. In one corner were huge reed-mat bins into which flour was dumped. I recoiled at the sight of insects buzzing and flitting around, not to mention the worms in the bins. The flour in one bin was covered with a blue mould that smelled awful.<sup>36</sup>

Thanks to its monopoly on grain, in 1954 the state took in more than ever before, in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the overall crop. In Shandong the amount procured jumped from 2 million tonnes in 1953 to just under 3 million in 1954. Even when the increase was relatively modest it could be devastating: in Hebei it went from 1.9 million tonnes to 2.08 million, which represented a shift from 23.5 per cent up to 25.9 per cent of the harvest. In Shaanxi the overall proportion of food taken away increased from 19.5 per cent to 25.5 per cent in 1954. One of the highest proportions of all was in Jilin, where 50.7 per cent of all the grain was hauled away, even though the crop that year shrank to 5.31 million tonnes. It left the villagers with an average of 145 kilos a year.<sup>37</sup>

Deng Zihui, the man who oversaw work in the countryside from Beijing, put it in a nutshell. In July 1954, ten months after the monopoly had come into effect, he admitted that before liberation on average a villager had about 300 kilos set aside for food each year. Now that amount was reduced for every one of them, from north to south, to just about half a kilo a day, or a third less. And other foodstuffs were also lacking. Most people outside the cities never received more than 3 kilos of edible oil a year. Deng called the monopoly on grain ‘the only way when there is no way’, and that way was to ‘spread the pain evenly’. He would soon pay the price for his frankness.<sup>38</sup>

Evenly spread pain meant starvation, which was widespread in 1954, coming right on the heels of the famine in 1953. Already on 2 January 1954 the Central Committee warned that farmers were being driven to their deaths due to the state monopoly. In Henan and in Jiangxi, 4.5 million people were in dire straits. In Hunan up to one in every six villagers went hungry. Three million lacked food in Shandong. In Guizhou and Sichuan,

where up to a quarter of the population in mountainous areas did not have enough to eat, people sold their clothes, their land and their homes. Across the country people sold their children. In the single county of Ji'an, Jiangxi, thirty-two were sold within two months. This happened even in subtropical Guangdong. In a village in Puning county, Zhang Delai sold his offspring for 50 yuan. It was enough to buy rice and see him through the famine. In Anhui hordes of up to 200 beggars roamed the countryside. Some froze to death. In Linxia, Gansu, some of the victims were too weak even to walk down the road to the next village. 'The main reason', explained the inspectors dispatched by the provincial government, 'is that local cadres have not paid sufficient attention to the conditions of the crop last year and have committed serious errors in carrying out the unified sale and purchase system.'<sup>39</sup>

Most of these reports pointed out how much of the starvation was man-made. But in August the Central Committee decided to ascribe the worst famine since 1949 to 'natural disasters'. Instead of helping people in the countryside, it stressed how vital it was to procure the state-mandated amounts of grain, oil and cotton, all of which were essential to 'industrial production in the cities and the socialist reform of industry and commerce in the countryside'. A year later, as the telltale signs of famine appeared again in the spring of 1955, Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai approved a directive explaining that 'among those who shout loudly about grain shortages, the absolute majority in fact do not lack grain at all'. Zhou Enlai, as head of the State Council, merely tinkered with the numbers, concluding that the monopoly worked rather well. It worked so well that already in November 1953 and September 1954 it had been extended to oil crops and cotton respectively. Soon it covered all major foodstuffs and agricultural raw materials.<sup>40</sup>

One response to collectivisation was to leave the countryside. Villagers had always supplemented their income by going to the city in the slack season, working in factories or peddling goods. Sometimes they would stay away for years on end, sending remittances back home to support their families. In Raoyang county, Hubei, a quarter of all men from the countryside worked in the cities during the winter months in the early 1950s. But the state did not encourage rural mobility. Soon after liberation it sent millions of refugees, unemployed, demobilised soldiers and other undesirable elements to the countryside. They kept on coming back. Despite state efforts to reverse the flow, there were close to 20 million rural migrants, often relegated to dirty, arduous and sometimes dangerous jobs on the margins of



the urban landscape. As in the old days, they came in search of new opportunities and a better life, but other motivations also drove migration. As the state curtailed private commerce, pedlars, traders and merchants left the countryside in droves, seeking better pastures.

But most of all, people took to the roads because they wanted to escape from famine. After the state imposed a monopoly on grain, many villagers voted with their feet and joined a massive exodus from the countryside. In March 1954, over 50,000 villagers poured into Jinan, the capital of Shandong. In Port Arthur, more than 19,000 of them overwhelmed the small city in the autumn of 1953. They begged the Soviet troops for help. Eight thousand farmers were looking for work in Anshan, the site of a sprawling steel and iron complex in Manchuria. In the streets of Wuhan, the industrial city on the Yangzi, hundreds of impoverished villagers could be seen, many of them begging for food. Some had sold all their clothes; a few tried to commit suicide, possibly disappointed by the reality of the city that had been a beacon of hope. Some protested in front of government offices, screaming, crying, a few waiting to die. But the biggest magnet was Shanghai. In the summer of 1954, around 2,000 refugees came by train every single day. Hundreds also arrived by boat, some of them too poor to buy a ticket.<sup>41</sup>

In April 1953 the State Council had already passed a directive seeking to persuade hundreds of thousands of farmers in search of work to return to their villages. The attempt failed to stem the flow. In March 1954 even more stringent regulations were put on the books, curtailing the recruitment of workers from the countryside. In the following months the public security organs were beefed up, and substations were established everywhere to control the movement of people and guard the cities against a rural influx. Then, on 22 June 1955, Zhou Enlai signed a directive introducing the household-registration system, used in the cities since 1951, to the countryside.

It was the rough equivalent of the internal passport instituted decades earlier in the Soviet Union. Food was rationed from August 1955 onwards, and its distribution closely tied to the number of people registered in each household. The ration cards had to be presented at local grain stores, thus preventing the large-scale movement of people. But while the subsistence of urban residents was guaranteed by the state, rural residents had to feed themselves. From retirement benefits to health care, education and subsidised housing, the state looked after many of its employees in the cities, while letting people registered as ‘peasants’ (*nongmin*) fend for themselves. This status was inherited through the mother, meaning that even if a village

girl married a man from the city, she and her children remained ‘peasants’, deprived of the same entitlements accorded urban residents.

The household-registration system also carefully monitored the movements of people, even within the countryside, as a migration certificate was required for anybody thinking of changing residence. No government in China had ever restricted freedom of residence or prevented migration, except in contested zones during wartime. But in 1955 the freedom of domicile and freedom of movement came to an end for people in the countryside. Those who moved in search of a better life were now called *mangliu*, or ‘blind migrants’. It was a reverse homophone of *liumang*, meaning hooligan.<sup>42</sup>

The household-registration system tied the cultivator to the land, making sure that cheap labour was available in the co-operatives. This was the fourth stage of collectivisation. A mere step now separated villagers from serfdom, namely the ownership of the land.

## High Tide

A solar eclipse was always a bad omen in traditional China, but New Year's Day was the worst time for one to occur. On 14 February 1953, the first day of the lunar calendar, the moon partially blocked the sun, casting a dark shadow over the earth. Less than three weeks later Stalin died. In China flags stood at half-mast, with strips of black cloth flying on top. Public buildings in the capital were draped with black. At the Soviet embassy, the queue of mourners was four deep and so long that some streets had to be temporarily closed to traffic. People wore black armbands distributed by party activists standing on street corners. Further towards Tiananmen Square, in front of the entrance of the Forbidden City, a huge red platform was piled high with artificial wreaths and paper flowers. A portrait of Stalin towered above it. Loudspeakers alternated between funeral music and instructions to the crowd on how to behave. 'Don't sing – don't laugh – don't walk aimlessly – don't shout – keep order – behave as you were instructed in the newspaper.' The crowd was silent.<sup>1</sup>

The Chairman bowed before the portrait and laid a wreath. But he did not give a speech. For the previous thirty years he had followed Stalin's advice, sometimes willingly, sometimes grudgingly. Even in the midst of civil war, as his troops were gaining the upper hand, he continued to look to Moscow for advice and guidance. He was a faithful follower of Stalin and took pains to prove his loyalty by declaring that China would 'lean to one side' in 1949. After liberation the flow of telegrams between Beijing and Moscow increased even further, as the Chairman requested Stalin's advice on seemingly every matter.

Mao was a loyal student of Stalin, but even so the relationship had never been an easy one. Mao held many grudges against his mentor, who had humiliated him in Moscow only three years earlier. And he deeply resented the presence of Soviet troops in Manchuria. But most of all Mao wanted to be more Stalinist than Stalin would allow. In November 1947 the Chairman had written to Moscow to explain that he intended to eliminate all rival political parties: 'In the period of the final victory of the Chinese revolution – as was the case in the USSR and Yugoslavia – all political parties except the CCP will have to withdraw from the political scene.' But Stalin disagreed, telling him that the oppos-

ition parties in China would have to be included as part of a New Democracy for many years to come. ‘After the victory,’ Stalin explained, ‘the Chinese government will be a national revolutionary and democratic government, rather than a Communist one.’ Mao demurred, maintaining the pretence of democracy even as he set out to build a totalitarian state. Then, in February 1950, Stalin urged the Chairman to pursue a milder approach to land distribution, sparing the rich peasants who could help the country recover after years of warfare. A few months later Mao published a Land Reform Law which promised a less divisive policy even as violence tore the countryside apart. And in 1952, only months before he was felled by a stroke, Stalin had whittled down funding for China’s first Five-Year Plan, warning the Chinese leadership that they were requesting too much, too soon.<sup>2</sup>

Stalin’s death was Mao’s liberation. The Chairman was at last free from the restraining influence of Moscow. No longer were there any major constraints on his political vision. Of course, he continued to submit his views to the Kremlin, as telegraph wires continued to hum between the two red capitals, but no Soviet leader commanded as much respect as Mao, who had brought a second October Revolution to a quarter of the world, and fought the United States to a standstill during the Korean War. Soon the Chairman began to distance himself from the Soviet leadership.

He also drifted away from his colleagues. Mao had led his men to victory in 1949. Korea, too, was his personal glory, as he had pushed for intervention when other leaders in the party had wavered. He stood head and shoulders above his peers.

Even before Stalin died, Mao had started to undermine Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, who were in charge of the day-to-day handling of the economy, and were becoming too influential for Mao’s comfort. Zhou, the soft-spoken, slightly effeminate premier, had learned a decade earlier never to challenge the Chairman. In 1932 rivals of Mao had handed command over the battlefield to Zhou. The result had been a disaster, as Chiang Kai-shek mauled the communist troops and forced them on a Long March away from their bases in the south. After Mao had gained the upper hand in Yan’an, Zhou’s loyalty was tested in a series of ferocious self-criticism sessions from September to November 1943. He was accused of having led a faction that had sided with one of Mao’s rivals. Zhou grovelled and admitted that he had been a ‘political swindler’ who lacked principles, something he blamed on his pampered upbringing in a ‘feudal aristocratic family’. It was a gruelling experience, but Zhou managed to emerge from the ordeal as

Mao's faithful assistant, putting his organisational skills entirely at the service of the Chairman in order to redeem himself.<sup>3</sup>

Liu Shaoqi had gone to Moscow as a student in 1921. He was a frugal, taciturn man, best known as a zealous apparatchik who would regularly toil away through the night. Two decades later, in Yan'an, he and Zhou had sat at opposite ends of the table, as Liu was neck-deep in the campaign to flush out spies and saboteurs from the party. Although he left the dirty work of extracting confessions from suspects to Kang Sheng, the grim man who had worked with the Soviet secret police, Liu was the main architect of a theoretical framework justifying the witch-hunt. He excelled at his task and became Mao's second-in-command in 1943.<sup>4</sup>

Mao lacked interest in matters of daily routine and organisational detail, and he needed first-rate administrators he could trust to carry out his vision. Zhou and Liu were his able servants, always at his beck and call, come day or night. The Chairman's schedule was erratic, as he suffered from severe insomnia, anxiety attacks and depression, often caused by his constant fear that other high-ranking leaders were disloyal to him. Trust was of the essence. Mao relied on heavy doses of barbiturates, chloral hydrate and sodium secobarbital to sleep, and he often dozed off during the day and worked throughout the night, not hesitating to summon his staff and colleagues at all hours. He expected them to turn up immediately. So, in turn, top officials like Liu and Zhou relied on sleeping pills to get some rest, as they could never quite synchronise their working schedules with the routines of the Chairman.

Lack of sleep was only a minor inconvenience. They had to cope with Mao's unpredictable mood swings, tiptoe around him, flatter his ego and avoid any comments that might provoke suspicion or misunderstanding. They had to decipher his often obscure remarks, used to keep them guessing about his intentions. But the Chairman also deliberately employed vague terms to conceal his own ignorance, particularly in the realm of economics, of which he understood very little. He rarely voiced an opinion on concrete financial issues; when he did so, he sounded uninformed. This too was a delicate issue for Zhou and Liu, all the more so since they had to assume responsibility for running an increasingly complex state bureaucracy encompassing millions of employees. It was tempting for them to leave aside some of the more technical details of the economy in order to avoid embarrassing their master. But this was also fraught with danger, as Mao had a habit of switching unpredictably from complete aloofness in government affairs to obsessive attention to detail. During the purge of government ranks in 1952,

for instance, he issued directives on the number of culprits to be arrested almost daily, only to abandon interest suddenly as the campaign tapered off, leaving Liu to cope with the mess.<sup>5</sup>

By 1952 Zhou and Liu had assembled a powerful team of economic managers, including Bo Yibo, Chen Yun, Li Fuchun and Deng Zihui. Mao began to feel that he was being sidestepped, losing his grip over his subordinates as the debate over the economy became ever more complex. He was also impatient with slow economic growth, and realised that some of his colleagues had doubts about the pace of collectivisation. Liu, in particular, took the view that a transition to socialism would take a great deal of time. He even envisaged a business community that would contribute to the national economy for years to come. This jarred with Mao, but while Stalin was still alive he had to be prudent in taking Liu to task. Liu had studied in Moscow. In the summer of 1949 he had been the party's envoy to the Soviet Union, and Stalin had showered attention on him in six separate meetings. Mao, on the other hand, had been given the cold shoulder. In late February 1953, as Mao learned that Stalin was on his deathbed, he tried to stop Liu, who was in hospital for an appendectomy, from finding out. Liu was excluded from the memorial ceremony in honour of Stalin a few weeks later.<sup>6</sup>

In early 1953 Mao confronted Bo Yibo, the minister of finance who was part of Zhou and Liu's team of economic managers. Bo was responsible for a new tax system that alleviated some of the pressure on the private sector. In a note circulated to Bo and copied to several other top leaders, the Chairman complained bitterly: 'I did not know about this until I read about it in the newspapers, and I still don't understand it!' Zhou immediately realised that the Chairman was angry, and wrote a letter that very evening to try to defuse the situation. But a few days later the Chairman confronted Bo Yibo during a top leadership meeting: 'The revision of the tax system was not reported to the Centre in advance, but it was discussed with the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is seen to be more important even than the Party Centre! This new system is welcomed by the bourgeoisie, it is a mistake of rightist opportunism!' Mao's real targets, beyond pressing for speedier collectivisation, were the two men behind Bo, namely Zhou and Liu. The Chairman adopted a tactic he called 'pitching a stone to cause a ripple', using a proxy to assail the two most powerful men below him.<sup>7</sup>

The Chairman did not relent in the following months, despite Bo Yibo making several self-criticisms. Mao was strengthening his grip over the government even as he undermined his colleagues, demanding in March that 'all major and important directives, policies, plans and events in gov-

ernment work must be reported to the Centre for instruction beforehand'. In May he wrote a menacing note to Liu, insisting that 'all documents and telegrams issued in the name of the Centre can only be issued after I have seen them, *otherwise they are invalid*. Please be careful.' Before the assembled leadership a few weeks later, he reprimanded those who 'do not care so much' about collective leadership, preferring instead to be left alone.<sup>8</sup>

Having put Zhou and Liu on notice, Mao announced a change of speed in the pursuit of socialism at a Politburo meeting on 15 June 1953. Here is how he phrased it in the parlance of Marxism-Leninism:

The general line or the general task of the party for the transition period is basically to accomplish the industrialisation of the country and the socialist transformation of agriculture, handicrafts and capitalist industry and commerce in ten to fifteen years, or a little longer. This general line is a beacon illuminating our work in all fields. Do not depart from this general line, otherwise 'Left' or Right mistakes will occur.<sup>9</sup>

Mao called his speech 'Refute Right Deviationist Views that Depart from the General Line'. Zhou and Liu were never named, but his audience was in no doubt about what was happening. Both had worked hard to maintain the pretence of a New Democracy, used on Stalin's advice to assure entrepreneurs and industrialists that they could continue to run their businesses on a private basis. Mao savaged Zhou Enlai's formulation of 'the social order of New Democracy', and the term would never be used again. Even slogans about 'sustaining private property', according to the Chairman, were manifestations of 'rightism'. Democracy was out, socialism was in. The Chairman proposed the General Line, and in doing so he positioned himself above the party, using it as a yardstick to determine who was a rightist and who was a leftist on the road to socialism. It was a yardstick he would change repeatedly.<sup>10</sup>

Mao also promoted a number of outsiders to senior positions in Beijing as part of his strategy to undermine the tight group of economic managers gathered around Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai. He called this 'putting sand in the mix'. The most important newcomer was Gao Gang, the leader of Manchuria, who arrived in the capital in October 1952 to head the newly created State Planning Commission. He also took responsibility for eight economic ministries, ranging from light industry and fuel to textiles, thus sharing a large portion of what had previously fallen under Zhou Enlai's exclusive purview. Soon he was a fixture at all important leadership meetings. At the party headquarters in Zhongnanhai, the beautifully manicured compound



where the empress dowager had lived, he had an office just across the hallway from Mao. His family moved into a spacious residence on Dongjiao Mingxiang, formerly occupied by the French embassy. There was extensive personal contact between the two, with discussions going into the early hours of the night. Gao took cues from the Chairman, laying into Bo Yibo at one of the self-criticism meetings with the minister of finance, carefully reading from notes that Mao had revised and approved beforehand. Gao relished the attack on one of his personal enemies. A year earlier Bo had handed the Chairman a report on corruption in Manchuria, directly implicating Gao. Mao circulated the letter within the higher echelons of the party.<sup>11</sup>

The Chairman was impressed with Gao, and in the summer of 1953 trusted him with another task. He ordered him to investigate Liu Shaoqi's past to find out whether his number two had spied for the nationalists in the 1920s. Gao interpreted this as a sign that the Chairman wanted to get rid of Liu. But Mao was a master of the divide-and-rule game. Just as he held grudges against Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, he was also wary of Gao Gang. Years earlier, Gao had accompanied Liu to meet Stalin in Moscow. At one meeting that summer of 1949, Gao had floated the idea that Manchuria be declared the seventeenth republic of the Soviet Union to protect it from the United States. Stalin had fixed his eyes on Gao, and after a moment of awkward silence he had shrugged off the idea with a joke. But the proposal prompted Liu to telegraph Mao, demanding that Gao be recalled to Beijing. Mao approved the request, and on 30 July 1949 a defeated Gao went to the airport unaccompanied by other members of the delegation. Months later, when Mao undertook his own pilgrimage to Moscow, Stalin handed him a dossier containing incriminating evidence showing that Gao had personally sent confidential messages to the Soviet leader. Exactly what was in these files remains a mystery, but it did not seem to harm Gao's career. He remained in charge of Manchuria, which soon had thousands of technical advisers from the Soviet Union, working in every capacity from top executives to lowly trackmen on the railways, operated jointly by China and Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Mao tolerated Gao while Stalin was alive. But by bringing him into the Politburo in Beijing in October 1952, the Chairman also removed him from his fiefdom and distanced him geographically from the Soviet Union. He could observe him more closely. Gao did not fare well. He was a talker, and his reputation for shooting off his mouth was confirmed as he met with several Soviet diplomats. He expounded on internal politics. He scoffed about

the budget deficit. He provided details about infrastructure projects that had backfired. He ratted on his colleagues.<sup>13</sup>

How much of this Mao knew is unclear, but he sent Gao to Moscow in August 1953 to liaise with the new Soviet leadership. After Stalin had choked to death, his eyes bulging in a last gasp for air, his security boss Lavrenti Beria had been the first to leap forward and kiss his lifeless body. The following day Beria seized power from his terrified colleagues and reigned for a brief two months. On 28 June, Nikita Khrushchev and several others ambushed him and placed him under arrest for ‘criminal activities against the party and the state’. Gao met Khrushchev but stayed in Moscow for only two days. He had not been allowed to travel with his own secretary. Ye Zilong, Mao’s personal secretary, went along instead, watching Gao’s every step. On the way back to Beijing, Gao was reportedly downcast, feeling that ‘the clouds were gathering around him, and this trip would bring him nothing good’.<sup>14</sup>

What precisely these worries were is not certain, but in the following months Gao started lobbying for power, hoping to oust Liu Shaoqi as number two. There were endless parties at his residence, as Gao tried to woo potential allies. He was in cahoots with Rao Shushi, the powerful leader who had controlled most of east China. He leaked a highly confidential list of potential members to be considered for a future Politburo. He toured the south to meet military leaders like Lin Biao, who was not on the list, trying to win their support in removing Liu Shaoqi as the Chairman’s successor – with a delegation of twenty other regional leaders in tow.

Gao’s political fortunes waned dramatically on 17 December after Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping visited the Chairman to expose his underground activities. They had three lengthy meetings, joined by Zhou Enlai and Peng Dehuai. Mao spoke to other leaders in the following days. He met Gao alone on 23 December. The next day the Chairman assembled his inner circle and warned that there were two headquarters in Beijing, only one of which was under his command: ‘In front of No. 8 Dongjiao Mingxiang [Gao’s residence], there has been a stream of horses and carriages, while in front of the New China Gate [the formal entrance to the Zhongnanhai compound], it has been so quiet that one can catch sparrows.’<sup>15</sup>

Gao Gang was not named, but the message was unmistakable. Gao broke out in a sweat. Earlier that day, Moscow had announced that Beria and six of his henchmen had been executed after a six-day trial. One of Beria’s six accomplices was Sergei Goglidze, who had been chief of security in the Far East. Years later, at the Lushan plenum in September 1959, Mao re-

vealed that Moscow had betrayed a promise not to spy on China by sending Goglidze to collude with Gao Gang.<sup>16</sup>

Gao Gang was purged for ‘treachery’ and ‘splitting the party’. At a tense meeting in February 1954, Zhou Enlai was put in charge of his prosecution in the Chairman’s absence. Military security was strengthened around the residences of leaders who might have sided with Gao, while armed guards stood on alert in the conference hall. A tea boy who was allowed into the room was taken aback when he saw Zhou’s face ‘contorted into a picture of ferocity’ as he dressed down Gao. Two days later Gao tried to kill himself with a gun taken from his bodyguard, but in a brief struggle between the two men the bullet missed its target. Half a year later, despite round-the-clock surveillance, he managed to swallow enough sleeping pills to commit suicide. Rao Shushi, for good measure, was also accused of forming an ‘anti-party clique’ and was locked away. A witch-hunt followed, as other leaders were denounced and packed off to the gulag for scheming against the party.<sup>17</sup>

Mao was the only one who benefited from the whole affair. Gao’s purge sent a signal to the Russians that the Chairman would not tolerate any further Soviet meddling in Chinese affairs. Gao had also served the Chairman well as an attack dog against Liu Shaoqi. Liu himself was finally reinstated, but not before grovelling in a lengthy confession at a party convention at which he threw his weight enthusiastically behind the drive to collectivise the country. The road was paved for a Socialist High Tide.<sup>18</sup>

On 15 June 1953 the Chairman had announced that agriculture, commerce and industry would be fully socialised ‘in ten to fifteen years’, a position he called the General Line. But even as farmers were herded into co-operatives and ever greater amounts of food requisitioned under a grain monopoly introduced later that year, he wanted to whip up the pace of collectivisation. Under the co-operatives, farmers could still hide the grain they were supposed to sell to the state or pretend that the harvest had been a failure. They still owned the land and were in charge of their own working schedules. What Mao wanted was socialism. And socialism meant agricultural collectives in which the grain went straight from the fields into the granaries, all of it under the control of the state. Stalin had accomplished this in the Russian countryside in the early 1930s, and that was what the Chairman wished to achieve: ‘This road travelled by the Soviet Union is our very model.’<sup>19</sup>

It was not the road favoured by most villagers. As we saw in the preceding chapter, the state took more food in 1954 than ever before, in absolute

numbers and as a proportion of the overall crop. Famine gripped large parts of the countryside, made worse by a series of devastating floods. In the autumn of 1954, farmers were once again destroying their tools, felling trees and slaughtering their livestock. Some openly rebelled, as pitched battles were fought between villages and the security forces. In the early months of 1955, Deng Zihui, the man who had calculated that on average farmers had a third less food than before liberation, started allowing some co-operatives to disband. He did so as the head of a committee on agriculture, but not before obtaining Mao's full consent. Mao approved some small adjustments, but he changed his mind in April, as he travelled south and saw flourishing fields by the side of the railway from the window of his personal train. In Shanghai he met with the mayor, a tall man with a bouffant hairstyle who lived in awe of Mao. Ke Qingshi told the Chairman how Deng Zihui had dampened enthusiasm for collectivisation among his men. Back in Beijing Mao warned Deng to be careful with the dissolution of co-operatives, 'otherwise you will have to make a self-criticism'.<sup>20</sup>

Over the following weeks Mao continued to attack 'negative attitudes' towards collectivisation. On 17 May 1955, in a meeting with provincial leaders in Hangzhou, he suggested that provinces should emulate each other in the number of new co-operatives they set up. He dismissed concerns about excessive grain requisitions: 'When it comes to the problem of grain, there is a trend inside and outside the party that says that the situation is not right. That is wrong. The way I see it, the situation is right, it's just that there are a few hiccups.' In the margin of a report on co-operatives in Guangxi province, he scribbled that 'Middle peasant claims of hardship are all fake.' When news of forced procurements in a village in Guangdong landed on his desk, he wrote: 'Two households who refused to sell their grain have been detained. The co-operatives are very good.'<sup>21</sup>

But the slowdown continued. Some provinces ignored the Chairman's instructions of 17 May and continued to take their cue from Deng Zihui. On 11 July Mao met with Deng and several other senior managers, trying to push for a target of 40 per cent of all villages to be turned into co-operatives by 1957. Deng would not yield. Mao spoke sarcastically: 'You consider yourself to be familiar with peasants but you are also very obstinate!' The meeting lasted for five hours. Still Deng refused to change his views. After the meeting, Mao confided to a colleague that Deng Zihui's ideas 'are so stubborn that they should be bombed by artillery'.<sup>22</sup>

A warning shot across Deng's bows came three weeks later. On 31 July 1955 Mao called for a new campaign to accelerate the transition to so-

cialism, which would now take no more than three years. 'A hurricane in the new socialist mass movement will soon sweep across the villages throughout the country,' the Chairman announced. He added an ominous comment. 'Some of our comrades are tottering along like a woman with bound feet, constantly complaining about the others: too fast, too fast! They think that excessive quibbling, unwarranted complaints, endless worries and countless precepts are the correct policy for guiding the socialist mass movement in the rural areas. No! This is not the correct policy, it is a wrong policy.'<sup>23</sup>

The tone was set. A few weeks later, in the version circulated to a larger audience of party members, the term 'hurricane' was changed to 'high tide'. The chief opponent to the Socialist High Tide, Mao determined, was Deng Zihui, soon to be cast aside as a 'rightist opportunist'. Mao effectively terminated his career when speaking before the assembled heads of all provinces and large cities on 15 August. He condemned Deng's order to slow down the pace of collectivisation as a 'breach of party discipline', as he had issued orders 'without passing through the Centre, which is inappropriate'. 'Zihui has spoken,' Mao asked rhetorically, 'so is his personal decision binding or the one reached by the collective leadership?' The Chairman made clear his views on the road to socialism. 'A tottering pace in collectivisation suits the rich peasants, it conforms to the capitalist road [they want to take].' 'Socialism', he continued, 'must have a dictatorship, it will not work without it . . . This is a war: we are opening fire on peasants with private property. Socialism by half is half a war. This is a war that takes place among a population of 500 million people, it is a war led by the communist party.' Those landlords and rich peasants who sabotaged the co-operatives were counter-revolutionaries who should be sent to labour camps. Intellectuals like Liang Shuming, who had been branded a reactionary three years earlier for writing a letter describing the countryside as the ninth level of hell, were also counter-revolutionaries. In fact, all 'those who complain about the state of the countryside are peasants with excess grain: Liang Shuming, Peng Yihu – there are also those inside the party'.<sup>24</sup>

A high tide rose up and swept away most of the small, privately owned farms in the villages of China. The changes were dramatic. In July 1955 only about 14 per cent of the 120 million families in the countryside were members of a co-operative. Less than a year later, by May 1956, more than 90 per cent belonged to a co-operative. The majority of these were collectives. In the elementary co-operatives, launched in 1953, each farm-

er nominally shared his patch of land with other members, not unlike a shareholder in a corporation. Sometimes months could be spent trying to evaluate the value of the land and its potential production. Livestock, fishponds, tools and even trees were all assigned a value before being entered into a co-operative. Endless conflicts over these evaluations arose not only between cadres and the farmers, but also between villagers with different class labels. Everywhere, it seemed, poor peasants were discriminated against by those with more assets, as the dispossessed had little to contribute and everything to gain from the co-operatives. In some places bans were passed on blind people joining co-operatives. All these issues were solved by transforming the co-operatives into collectives resembling the farms in the Soviet Union. The collectives took the land from the farmers. They transformed the farmers into agricultural workers who received work points for their labour, which had to be carried out under the orders of a local cadre. This was the last stage of collectivisation. Farmers were now bonded labourers at the beck and call of the state.<sup>25</sup>

More restrictions on private property appeared in March 1956. Farmers who had been enrolled in the collectives had retained the right to cultivate a small plot for their own needs, in their spare time. Now the party reduced these parcels to 5 per cent or less of the overall surface.<sup>26</sup>

The effects of collectivisation on the economy were devastating. The total cropping area for food was reduced by 3 to 4 million hectares. Grain output failed to keep up with population growth. Slaughter of farm animals, which had been a continuous problem in the countryside since liberation, took on unprecedented proportions. And just as in the cities a campaign against counter-revolutionaries unfolded after the arrest of Hu Feng in June 1955, so in the countryside the High Tide unleashed a wave of terror, as local cadres arrested people by the hundreds of thousands. As Mao had made clear over the summer, it was a war on 'peasants with private property'.<sup>27</sup>

But the High Tide was not confined to the countryside alone. In 1956 most of industry and commerce were nationalised. This, too, was accomplished in the midst of terror. Among the party leaders toppled in the wake of the Gao Gang affair was Pan Hannian, the powerful deputy mayor of Shanghai. He and Yang Fan, the chief of security in Shanghai, were arrested in May 1955. Their purge sent shivers through the business community. 'If officials who had been as powerful as he and Yang Fan were unable to command security in the new regime, what chance had we?' wondered Robert Loh. It was well known in the business community that Pan Hannian and other senior officials who vanished overnight had been very close to indus-

trialists like Rong Yiren and Guo Dihuo. They visited each other. They held parties at which musicians were hired, singing along to old tunes of Beijing opera. Pan, 'always well dressed and well mannered', played bridge with Rong. His wife came from a family of bankers closely linked to Guo. All this took place after Mao's attack on the bourgeoisie in 1952, when Rong had been reduced to tears on a public stage, forced to proclaim his shame over his family's exploitative past.<sup>28</sup>

With Pan Hannian and Yang Fan removed, Rong could no longer rely for security on his friendship with high officials. His hand shaking, he went through a photo album taking out every photo that included Pan and burning it. Many others like him were affected, in one way or another, by the removal of hundreds of thousands of people declared in 1955 to be 'counter-revolutionaries'. Just outside the city of Shanghai, in Jiangsu province, over 30,000 people were arrested and a further 15,000 purged for listening to short-wave radios, spreading rumours, hiding weapons, sabotaging work in factories or pasting counter-revolutionary slogans on walls. From top to bottom of the social scale, terror once again gripped the cities.<sup>29</sup>

The time had come for Rong Yiren and others to hand over the keys of their enterprises to the state. But the Chairman wanted them to do so voluntarily. So later in October 1955 he invited representatives of trade and commerce to a meeting in the Yihetang Hall in Zhongnanhai, soliciting their advice. He listened carefully, occasionally expressing concern, as Rong and others begged for a Socialist High Tide in industry. Rong gave a long speech, reviewing the history of his own textile mills, which would have been doomed had it not been for liberation. Whatever reservations he and others had harboured against state intervention in the following years had been completely misplaced. Rong was full of hope for the future of the People's Republic under the correct guidance of the Communist Party of China. There was only one snag. Rong felt frustrated by his inability to contribute more to the cause of socialism. 'Although my enterprise is already under joint private-state ownership, I am not satisfied. I want to go further on the road to ownership by the whole people . . . We want to walk towards communism.' More speeches by other captains of industry followed. Mao smiled. The occasion was followed by a dinner.<sup>30</sup>

Back in Shanghai, Rong, who was one of the leaders of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, prepared his fellow industrialists for nationalisation. When they were ready, the Chairman came through Shanghai. To mark the occasion, Rong offered his Shenxin Number Nine Mill to the Chairman. Mao was delighted. Then came a meeting with eighty



leading businessmen at the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hall, the gleaming new structure towering above all other buildings in Shanghai. This occasion, too, was full of gravitas, as the doors swung open and the Chairman slowly walked into the hall, his face beaming with a benevolent smile. The audience gasped, stiffening with surprise. ‘He smiles often, and his expression is usually friendly and mild. He gives the impression of being a kindly, simple, honest peasant.’ The Chairman puffed occasionally on his cigarette. The entrepreneurs were nervous, but Mao put them at their ease. ‘Why don’t you smoke?’ he asked them calmly. ‘It won’t hurt you. Churchill has smoked throughout his long life and he is in good health. In fact, the only man I know who doesn’t smoke but has lived long is Chiang Kai-shek.’ They all laughed. The tension dissipated. ‘Now I have come from Beijing to seek your advice,’ he went on. Many businessmen, he said, had been requesting that the socialist transformation of private enterprise should be hastened, lest the national bourgeoisie lag behind in progress towards socialism. Robert Loh, who was in the audience, describes what happened next: ‘One by one, responding to the cues of the Chairman, the leading industrialists asked that socialism be introduced with the least delay possible. They vied to outdo each other in flattery. Mao listened for two hours.’<sup>31</sup>

Mao left, promising to give serious thought to their opinions. But he warned them that he would have to consider carefully their best interests before deciding to accelerate the pace of nationalisation. A few weeks after the meeting, the authorities announced that the transformation to socialism was to be accomplished not in six years, as most had anticipated, but in a mere six days. Shock teams were sent around the city to nationalise all industry, forcing businessmen to give up their enterprises and become members of the Federation of Industry and Commerce. Most did so out of fear, but they had to demonstrate wild enthusiasm in public. The reason for this was simple. Every entrepreneur knew that, once his property had been handed over to the state, his only means of livelihood would depend on the whim of the party. And many remembered the brutality of the campaign against them in 1952. This time an impression of joy was created: ‘When we found that in the campaign we were to be heroes instead of victims, we were almost dizzy with relief. Thus some of our joy was genuine, although none of it came from “entering socialism” as the propaganda claimed.’<sup>32</sup>

A parade was staged, with banners, bands, drums, gongs, firecrackers and large crowds. ‘Encouragement stations’ were placed along the route of the march. As the entrepreneurs approached the Sino-Soviet Friendship Hall, the crowd started shouting slogans such as ‘Salute the Patriotic National

Capitalists Who are Marching Bravely towards Socialism' or 'Welcome our National Capitalist Friends to Join our Socialist Family'. Young girls gave them flowers and refreshments. The entrepreneurs carried stacks of large red envelopes which contained their formal applications for full nationalisation. After they had presented these to Chen Yi, the mayor of Shanghai, delegations representing workers, peasants and students burst into the hall to congratulate the business community.

The vast fortunes that some families had accumulated over many generations vanished overnight. Small shopowners also lost everything, as they were organised into co-operatives. Throughout the country more than 800,000 owners of private enterprises, big or small, were voluntarily stripped of their property rights. All commerce and industry became functions of the state.

The government expropriated private enterprise under a so-called 'redemption-purchase policy', although the policy entailed neither purchase nor redemption. Only token compensation was offered, often about one-fifth of the real value of each property. Each owner was also to be credited 5 per cent per year of the assessed value of the property, although this interest would be paid for seven years only. Even this promise would not last.

Small shopowners were ruined. Many used their business premises as living quarters for themselves and their families, paying for their living expenses out of the till. But now their personal possessions were taken away by the state, sometimes down to their pots and pans and even the baby's crib. The compensation was barely sufficient to pay for cigarettes. Those who were lucky were allowed to continue running their shops as state employees at 20 yuan a month. But many now faced starvation. If they tried to find a job elsewhere, they discovered that they were classified as capitalists, meaning that they were denied the benefits that gave ordinary workers some semblance of security. As in 1952, a wave of suicides followed, although this time the authorities intervened quickly. Many younger entrepreneurs were taken from their families and sent to the border wastelands to work on socialist projects. Older men received some financial assistance from a mutual fund, set up with the money from the more solvent firms. Many of the wealthier businessmen were paid in government bonds. They were non-negotiable, and when they became due, the principal and accrued interest were reinvested in more bonds.

But in most cases the owners of big industries were not concerned with compensation. They wanted a job from the state. Many were relatively well off, and some even retained their titles as managers or department heads. A

select few fared particularly well, having courted the leadership and taken the lead in offering their holdings to the state. They were appointed to prestigious committees, sometimes even sent to serve in the capital. One such was Rong Yiren, who had publicly donated his whole enterprise to the state. Soon Mao promoted him to become deputy mayor of Shanghai. Although the regime would catch up with most of them during the Cultural Revolution, Rong survived the tumult thanks to the protection of Zhou Enlai, living in Zhongnanhai as an adviser to the textile ministry.<sup>33</sup>

## The Gulag

The lives of millions were swallowed up by a vast array of prison camps scattered across the length and breadth of the country. This network is sometimes referred to as the *laogai*, an abbreviation for *laodong gaizao*, or ‘reform through labour’. Its origins date back to the early days of the communist party, when prisoners were put to work to help meet the cost of their incarceration. Like everyone else, they were also supposed to reform themselves through endless study sessions and indoctrination meetings.

Already during the civil war, as huge stretches of the countryside were liberated, there were too few prisons to keep up with a swelling number of convicts. Temples, guilds, schools and factories were requisitioned. Chain gangs were used on public works, from road maintenance to dyke construction. Large labour camps, many of them holding thousands of inmates, sprang up across the countryside. In the areas of Shandong controlled by the communist party, almost every district boasted a camp, each holding up to 3,000 inhabitants. The prisoners were made to reclaim wasteland, grow wheat, extract minerals or make bricks. Many did not have shoes, even in the depth of winter, while hunger was pervasive. Those who tilled the fields supplemented their diet with weeds like dandelions, while a few lucky ones caught frogs.<sup>1</sup>

The fall of the cities did nothing to alleviate the pressure. The nationalists had a sophisticated network of prisons, many built and run according to the highest standards current in Europe and the United States at the time. But they never had more than 90,000 convicts, as they used fines, short sentences, general amnesties, remission of sentence and parole to keep people out of gaol. An extra 120 penitentiaries formerly run by the nationalists barely dented the shortfall in prison capacity.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike its predecessors, the new regime did not hesitate to imprison people for a very long time, often for the slightest misdemeanour. Su Wencheng was sentenced to fifteen years in Beijing for robbing graves in December 1949. Others in the capital faced a spell of five to ten years for stealing a pair of trousers or a bicycle. These were common criminals, but there was a growing list of political crimes which seemed to warrant a term of ten years or more.

The catch-all term of ‘counter-revolutionary’ was common, covering just about anything from listening to foreign radio to slacking at work, but other charges included having worked for military organisations or civil organisations in the previous regime and betraying the nation or the party.<sup>3</sup>

The prison population reached crisis point soon after the Great Terror was launched in October 1950. Within half a year well over a million people were languishing in gaol. A whole new incarceration system had to be devised. In Hubei, where tens of thousands were held, progressively larger camps appeared at every level of the administrative hierarchy, stretching from 150 inmates in each county and 500 in each large city to a thousand for entire regions, while at the top the provincial security bureau ‘administers ten labour camps for more than 10,000 inmates’. In Guangxi, where a ferocious campaign unfolded, more than 80,000 people were behind bars. So crowded was the county gaol in Xingye that the standard width of an inmate’s sleeping space was no more than 20 centimetres. In Pingnan they were not allowed to wash more than once a week, despite soaring temperatures and high humidity. The stench was repulsive. Nine out of ten inmates suffered from skin disease. Over a hundred died each month.<sup>4</sup>

So dire were the facilities in some improvised gaols in Sichuan that prisoners excreted in their trousers, their bottoms covered in maggots. In the county prison in Chongqing, a fifth of the inmates died within half a year. Most of the others were sick. The head of the Public Security Bureau refused to improve the situation. His motto was that ‘it is better for prisoners to die than for them to flee’. All over south-west China thousands of prisoners were buried every month. In the north, which had been under communist control for much longer, the situation was no better. In Cangxian county, Hebei, a third of all inmates were sick, leading to dozens of deaths. Scabies, lice and cockroaches were common. Here too the air was so rank that guards refused to approach the prisoners. Quentin Huang, a bishop who refused to relinquish his faith, was locked up in a wooden cage with eighteen other convicts. It had bars about 10 centimetres in diameter each and about 5 centimetres apart. The door was locked and chained. The cage was about 2 by 2.5 metres in dimension, situated at the dark, damp end of a long room. The other end of the room was used as quarters for the guards who watched the prisoners. ‘Neglect and delay, particularly with diarrhoea cases, soon turned a part of the wooden cage into a natural latrine, filthy and foul smelling with lice, fleas, and hungry rats, both big and small, running hither and thither even in the daytime, from the farther corners of the muddy walls just next to the wooden cage.’<sup>5</sup>

In the spring of 1951 the leadership decided to alleviate the pressure by putting more prisoners to work, using them to build roads, dig reservoirs or bring fallow land under cultivation. Mao even opined that if the executions stopped at two per thousand and everyone above that quota were sentenced to a life of hard labour, this would amount to a formidable workforce. 'But of course it is troublesome to carry out these ideas in practice, it is not quite as straightforward as killing the lot,' he mused. Nonetheless, taking the Soviet Union as his inspiration, he proposed a quota of 0.5 per thousand, or 300,000 prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

Luo Ruiqing, as head of public security, was tasked with the logistics of the operation. It soon ran into difficulties. Transporting a third of a million people all over the country was no small feat, even for a one-party state. And once they arrived at their respective destinations, often by lorry, sometimes by train, the inmates had to be housed, fed and clothed. Of the 60,000 victims earmarked for hard labour in the ore, coal and tin mines spread across the mountains in Yunnan, barely 3,000 could be accommodated. Plans to deploy a docile labour force of 200,000 on irrigation projects were even more challenging, as very few inmates could be effectively supervised in the open.<sup>7</sup>

But the new regime was not one to abandon a plan that looked good on paper merely because it ran into difficulties on the ground, so a constellation of labour camps, stretching across the country's most inhospitable border regions, began taking shape. In Manchuria there existed a vast, swampy expanse infected with mosquitoes called the Great Northern Wilderness. Further west, in Qinghai, labour camps appeared in a bleak expanse pock-marked by salt marshes and surrounded by arid mountains. In the south there was a string of salt, tin and uranium mines, while brick factories, state farms and irrigation projects appeared almost everywhere. By the end of 1951 more than 670,000 people had been sent to these camps (by now the total prison population had doubled to 2 million). Many inmates were exhausted even before they arrived. Hard labour finished off many of them. In a salt mine in Hebei, prisoners slept on rough mats strewn directly on a humid floor. There was not even enough water to drink, let alone food, and a hundred died each month, many from dysentery. Elsewhere prisoners died of cold. In Sichuan the inmates worked along the railway without any trousers in the middle of the winter. Fourteen from a unit of 300 froze to death. In Yan'an, the erstwhile red capital, close to 200 died of cold. In the tin mines of Lianxian, Guangdong, prisoners were so badly treated that one in three committed suicide or died of disease within a year. And despite all

the work they were forced to perform, each prisoner still cost the state far more than the centrally allocated quota had anticipated. On top of this, more than 1.2 million inmates did not contribute to their own upkeep.<sup>8</sup>

Over the following years the overall population in the gulag did not increase substantially, hovering around 2 million, although an ever greater proportion of prisoners was forced to work. For every man or woman who died of disease or maltreatment, another one entered a camp. By 1955 more than 1.3 million people were at work, contributing over 700 million yuan in industrial products as well as 350,000 tons of grain to the state. They came from all walks of life, as the gulag became a microcosm of the wider population outside the camps. On the lowest rung of the social hierarchy were poor farmers, sent to the gulag because they could not repay their loans to the state. At the top were more than 3,000 doctors, engineers and technical experts, rounded up in 1955 as part of the hunt for counter-revolutionary cliques. In between were priests, monks, teachers, students, journalists, entrepreneurs, clerks, pedlars, fishermen, musicians, bankers, prostitutes and soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

Nine out of ten were political prisoners. Many were not formally sentenced for several years after their arrest. The case of Duan Kewen, who had worked for the nationalists, took two years. He wore chains for five years, even as he worked in a brick factory. He was hardly unique. By 1953 roughly 300,000 new cases were brought every year, even though there were only 7,000 judges in the whole country. The backlog amounted to an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 cases. This did not include many farmers who were sent to prison without a trial at the village level. And when a court hearing came, the hastily convened People's Tribunals dispensed rough justice. A powerful inspectorate, set up by the party, examined thousands of cases and concluded that only 90 per cent were 'correct'. Tens of thousands of victims ended up in the gulag for no reason, even by the standards of the regime itself, as 'innocent people are arrested, imprisoned or shot, families are broken up and lives are destroyed'. In some counties where random checks were carried out, for instance in Gansu and Ningxia provinces, as many as 28 per cent of inmates had been wrongly accused of a crime.<sup>10</sup>

Their experiences varied enormously, if only because the sprawling gulag itself was so diverse, but by all accounts the inmates lived in fear of violence. Next to the wooden cage used to lock up Quentin Huang was a pile of ropes, shackles and handcuffs. Some victims spent years in chains, for instance Duan Kewen and Harriet Mills. Many tightening devices were also



very heavy, digging into the skin and lacerating the flesh. Beatings were common, administered with bamboo sticks, leather belts, heavy clubs or bare knuckles. Sleep deprivation was widely used. Other forms of torture were more ingenious, and came with poetic titles drawn from traditional literature. ‘Dipping the Duckling into the Water’ meant suspending a victim upside down with bound hands. ‘Sitting on the Tiger Bench’ consisted of fastening somebody’s knees to a small iron bench with his hands cuffed behind the back. Bricks were inserted under the tied legs, causing them to bend unnaturally, eventually breaking at the knees. There was an extensive repertoire of torture methods, as ever more ingenious ways of degrading other human beings were developed. In Beijing some victims had their feet shackled to the window until they fainted. Salt was rubbed into their wounds. Some had to squat on the bucket used for excrement and hold a spittoon for hours without moving. Others were sodomised. In the south the guards sometimes built crude electric machines with a battery in a wooden box and a wheel on the outside. Two cords were attached to the victim’s hands or other body parts and then the wheel was turned to generate an electric shock.<sup>11</sup>

The list could go on. But by all accounts the most dreaded aspect of incarceration was not the frequent beatings, the hard labour or even the grinding hunger. It was thought reform, referred to by one victim as a ‘carefully cultivated Auschwitz of the mind’. As Robert Ford, an English radio operator, put it after a four-year spell in prison, ‘When you’re being beaten up, you can turn into yourself and find a corner of your mind in which to fight the pain. But when you’re being spiritually tortured by thought reform, there’s nowhere you can go. It affects you at the most profound, deepest levels and attacks your very identity.’ The self-criticism and indoctrination meetings lasted for hours on end, day in, day out, year after year. And unlike those on the outside, once the group discussions were over, the others were still in the same cell. They were encouraged to examine, question and denounce each other. Sometimes they had to take part in brutal struggle meetings, proving on whose side they stood by beating a suspect. ‘By the time you got through such a meeting you would, if you were a conscientious person at all, suffer terribly mentally and groan for days. Silence and distress were the outcome.’ Every bit of human dignity was stripped away as victims tried to survive by killing their former selves. Wang Tsunming, a nationalist officer captured in 1949, came to the conclusion that thought reform was nothing less than the ‘physical and mental liquidation of oneself

by oneself'. Those who resisted the process committed suicide. Those who survived it renounced being themselves.<sup>12</sup>

While the total population in the gulag stood at roughly 2 million in the early years of the regime, it ballooned in 1955. That year another purge of counter-revolutionaries was launched, reaching far beyond the Hu Feng case. More than 770,000 people found themselves under arrest. It was more than the existing labour camps could bear. A whole new dimension was added to the world of incarceration, swallowing up 300,000 new inmates. It was called 're-education through labour', or *laojiao*. In contrast to 'reform through labour', or *laogai*, it dispensed with judicial procedures altogether, holding any undesirable element indefinitely – until deemed fully 're-educated'. These camps were organised not by the Ministry of Public Security, but by the police and even the local militia. This shadow world formally received the seal of approval in January 1956 and was designed for those who did not qualify for a term of hard labour yet were not deemed worthy of liberty either. People could now be arrested and disappear without any form of trial. Its use would expand dramatically after August 1957.<sup>13</sup>

Not every suspect was sent to the gulag. One response to prison congestion was to place convicts under the 'supervision of the masses' (*guanzhi*). This meant being at the beck and call of local cadres, who controlled every aspect of the lives of these victims. They served as scapegoats and were paraded through the villages during every major campaign, in some cases as many as two or three hundred times even before the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. They were forced to carry out the most demeaning jobs, from carrying manure to working on public roads. They were fed scraps of food or mere leftovers.

The numbers were substantial. By 1952, in parts of Sichuan, over 3 per cent of the population ended up under some form of judicial control. This was the case, for instance, for several villages in Qingshen county. The victims included anyone considered to be a social misfit, from opium smokers and petty thieves to mere vagrants passing through. In Shandong up to 1.4 per cent of villagers were placed under supervision, the majority without any form of approval by the Public Security Bureau. In Changwei county, supervision was used 'randomly and chaotically'. The local militia locked up anybody deemed to be troublesome. One example was a man who made the mistake of talking back to a cadre.

Those caught up in the punitive wheels of the system were routinely tortured. Some were forced to kneel on broken stones, others had to bend forward in the so-called aeroplane position. A few had to go through mock executions. In Yidu entire families were put under surveillance; some of their daughters were raped. Extortion was rife. ‘Similar examples are too numerous to be enumerated,’ concluded the authors of an investigative report. Luo Ruiqing himself wrote of the pain and humiliation with which the system was shot through. In You county, he stressed, every breach of discipline was met with punishment, whether speaking at work or being absent from work for more than an hour. Some were beaten, others were stripped of their trousers, a few were given *yin* and *yang* haircuts, as one half of the head was shaved.<sup>14</sup>

In the cities too, people could be placed under public supervision, although this was relatively rare. In one case a graduate of Stanford University who worked as dean of a law college in Shanghai was picked up one morning during the Great Terror of 1951. The only charges brought against him were that he was a ‘lackey of the rich and an oppressor of the poor’ and that he had a brother in the Taiwanese government. For this he was sentenced to be kept under surveillance for three years.

He was made into a janitor at the trade association he had previously headed. He was paid 18 yuan a month and could live only by selling his household furnishings. His employers addressed him only to give him orders and wrote weekly reports on his behavior. He himself had to go once a week to the police with a written expression of his gratitude to the party for the leniency of the people’s justice; if his gratitude was not expressed in terms sufficiently abject, he was made to rewrite his paper until it was found acceptable. No one else dared speak to him, let alone try to help or comfort him.

After sixteen months he threw himself into a river.<sup>15</sup>

How many found themselves in a similar situation? Luo Ruiqing estimated that some 740,000 people were under public supervision in 1953, but from his desk in Beijing he could barely capture the extent to which people were detained locally without ever being reported to the higher authorities. A glimpse of this underground world comes from an investigation report on Sichuan filed in 1952. It noted that in four villages in Xinjin county ninety-six people were formally placed under supervision, but a further 279 found themselves in the same type of bonded labour without any form of judicial process. Nobody knows how many other people across the country were detained by local cadres, but the system must have added at least another 1 to 2 million to the captive population.<sup>16</sup>

With collectivisation in the countryside, the difference between a prisoner sent to a labour camp, a convict placed under supervision and a free farmer tilling his own plot became less and less obvious. This was particularly true with conscripted labour. Right from the start the regime had little hesitation in rounding up villagers to work on large projects carried out for the greater good. And from the beginning this spelt misery for those unfortunate enough to be drafted. In Suqian county in 1950 dozens of ordinary people died of cold, hunger and exhaustion, forced to work outside in subzero temperatures clothed in rags. Hunger was widespread, as they were fed mere scraps.<sup>17</sup>

These were not the teething pains of a new regime unaccustomed to organising *corvée* labour. The longer in power, the bigger the vision, as massive projects spread hunger and misery to millions of conscripted labourers. One of the biggest plans was to tame the Huai River, which flowed through the northern plain from south Henan towards north Jiangsu, where it joined the Yangzi River. It was notoriously vulnerable to flooding. By the winter of 1949, hundreds of thousands of paupers were sent to work along the Huai River. Instead of draining the waterlogged areas to make sure that the flow of the river could scour away its load of silt, they were compelled to build dykes and embankments. The plan had been conceived by party officials who had never even set foot in the area. When the snow melted the following spring, the river flooded some 130,000 hectares in the region around Suxian county alone, creating a lot of misery.<sup>18</sup>

After the flooding had been blamed on nature, Mao announced a programme to 'Harness the Huai River' with dams on the upper reaches and upstream reservoirs for storing floodwater. The project would last several decades. People were drafted by the hundreds of thousands, toiling in the icy water bare-legged, or lugging wet sand and earth in baskets suspended on shoulder-poles. They were housed far away from their homes, in tiny sheds built of bamboo, reed or corn stalks. Many had to travel for days to reach the river, carrying with them their own tools, clothes, stoves, quilts and mats. In 1951 the alarm was raised, as local cadres conscripted neighbouring farmers without any regard for agricultural production. When rain followed snow, week after week, food reserves quickly ran out, pushing many of the villages along the Huai River into famine.<sup>19</sup>

By 1953 the situation was even worse. Few farmers were given adequate food. Many survived on a watery concoction dished out three times a day.

Some were fed nothing but sorghum, a monotonous diet that caused excruciating constipation, so much so that ‘blood is everywhere in the toilets’. In Suxian county some young workers lay prostrate on the ground, crying with hunger, while others fought each other for an extra portion. Several wrote letters to their families pleading for help: ‘Think of a way to come and rescue a crowd of hungry ghosts!’ Some hanged themselves in despair. Discipline was relentless, all the more since many of the conscripted villagers were outcasts, classified as family members of ‘landlords’, ‘rich farmers’, ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘criminals’. Some cadres pinned red and white strips on the workers, distinguishing ‘glorious’ from ‘shameless’ ones. Those who spent more than three minutes in the toilet were punished. Tai Shuyi, a ruthless leader, forced his team to work throughout the night on several occasions. Within three days, over a hundred people were spitting blood. Accidents were common all along the river, as dykes subsided, structures collapsed and dynamite was exploded without proper control, killing hundreds. Tens of thousands were seriously ill but received no medical treatment. Those who could tried to escape. In some places, for instance the reservoir at Nanwan in Henan province, 3,000 of a total labour force of 10,000 managed to abscond.<sup>20</sup>

The situation was no better elsewhere. In Hubei, the villagers rounded up to work on a dam were not even provided with makeshift huts. They slept outside in the bitterly cold winter. One in twenty became severely ill, some dying as cadres just stood by and seemed ‘not to care’. Up further north in Zhouzhi county, a region of Shaanxi covered in mountain forests, a massive water-conservancy project compelled close to a million people to work for the state in 1953. Poverty was everywhere, forcing some families to give away their children as ‘the majority of workers lack food’. It was a taste of the future. In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, villagers would be herded into giant People’s Communes where food was distributed according to merit. Hundreds of millions would be forced to work on giant water-conservancy projects far from home, as the country became one enormous labour camp.<sup>21</sup>

The boundaries between the free and the unfree were also porous in the most remote border region of the country, namely the north-west. In 1949, as Chapter 3 explained, hundreds of thousands of demobilised soldiers, petty thieves, beggars, vagrants and prostitutes were sent to help develop and colonise the Muslim belt which ran through Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang. The trend continued unabated in the following years, as batch after batch of migrants was sent from the interior provinces, often along-

side convoys of political prisoners. Migration was supposed to be voluntary, but as with everything else in the People's Republic, quotas had to be met. All too often tales of piped water, electricity and tables laden with fresh fruit enticed credulous people seeking a better life. The reality was a far cry from the propaganda. After a long train journey followed by several days cramped in the back of a lorry, they were confronted with misery. The first contingents of settlers had to dig holes in the ground and sleep on rough mats on the floor, sheltered from the sand storms by a sheet of tarpaulin. Work consisted of levelling dunes, cutting shrubbery, planting trees and digging irrigation ditches. Many escaped and returned home. As rumours spread about the dire conditions in the north-west, the people most at risk of relocation – the poor, the unemployed and the politically undesirable – tried to avoid face-to-face encounters with the cadres in charge of recruitment. In Beijing they placed children at key intersections to warn them of their arrival. Those who genuinely volunteered or could not avoid relocation found themselves in holding centres without beds, sleeping on straw laid over a moist earthen floor. Some cried themselves to sleep, others absconded in the dead of night.<sup>22</sup>

By 1956 four out of five migrants to Gansu province faced hunger, with insufficient food to tide them over the spring. Their clothes were threadbare, while some children had no trousers and walked to school barefoot. There was no money to buy salt, edible oil, vegetables or even a needle to patch up their rags. The noble idea of reclaiming land from the desert ran into problems, as the sand was poor in nutrients. It never rained enough to grow much besides some wheat and a few vegetables. Li Shuzhen, who wormed her way back to the capital, wrote to the People's Congress: 'The government there only looks after you for three months, then it washes its hands of you. After the fields were ruined by hail, my father died of hunger.' Liu Jincai also complained: 'I spent more than two years there and did not even earn enough to buy a pair of cotton trousers.' And if that was not enough, the local population also discriminated against the migrants. Sometimes tensions over scarce resources degenerated into fistfights, as migrants were beaten unconscious. They were aliens in a foreign land, unable to speak the local language. So bad was the situation across the entire region that in December 1956 the minister of domestic affairs temporarily halted all migration.<sup>23</sup>

But one region was a success, and that was Xinjiang. After its annexation by Peng Dehuai in 1949, over 100,000 soldiers from the First Field Army stayed behind to prevent any secession. They cultivated the soil and protec-

ted the border. In 1954 they became part of a large development corporation called the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. Tens of thousands of demobilised soldiers, political prisoners and migrants from the east joined its ranks, building irrigation canals, roads and telephone lines. They planted walls of trees to protect their camps from the sand. They grew cotton and wheat in giant collective farms around the desert oases. Soon the Corps developed into the biggest landowner and largest employer in the region. Its tentacles spread everywhere, operating factories, roads, canals, railways, mines, forests and reservoirs. It had its own schools, hospitals, laboratories, police force and courts – not to mention a vast network of prisons and labour camps. It was a state within the state. In 1949 the Chinese accounted for no more than 3 per cent of the local population. Within half a decade the Corps had created ‘an army of Han Chinese colonists’. Few settlers were volunteers, least of all the political prisoners, but all were better off than the Uighurs and Muslims around them. Penal exile in Xinjiang was the foundation of one of the most successful programmes of colonisation in modern history.<sup>24</sup>



## Part Four

# Backlash (1956–57)

## Behind the Scenes

By 1956 China stood proud and triumphant. War was a distant memory. Inflation had been brought under control. Unemployment, seemingly, had been solved. Industry was churning out ever increasing amounts of iron and steel. The international prestige of the regime was at a zenith. No longer was China the sick man of Asia, as the People's Republic had fought the Americans to a standstill in the Korean War. And after the death of Stalin, no other communist leader enjoyed more prestige than Mao, the philosopher, poet and statesman in Beijing. Such was his standing that the Chairman increasingly assumed the mantle of leadership for developing countries around the world.

Ostensibly, the regime stood for values that had universal appeal: freedom, equality, peace, justice and democracy (albeit under the dictatorship of the proletariat). It promised security from hunger and want, with jobs and housing for all. Unlike liberal democracy, it proposed a unique social experiment to achieve these ideals, as people would merge into a classless society of plenty for all in which the state would wither away. Like the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution, the regime excelled at mesmerising very different audiences on the road to utopia. It offered economic equality to the discontents of capitalism. It whispered freedom to those liberals outraged by authoritarian governments. 'It flaunts patriotism before the nationalist, dedication before the devout, and revenge before the oppressed.' Communism, in short, was all things to all men.<sup>1</sup>

The People's Republic widely advertised its success. It built up a glowing image with a profusion of statistics. Everything, apparently, was measurable in the New China, from the latest coal output and grain production to the number of square metres of housing built since liberation. Whatever the object of measurement, the trend was always upwards, even though the figures were sometimes rather vague. Percentages, for instance, were always favoured. Lump sums were not broken down. Categories were rarely defined, indices often came without items, and price base periods shifted erratically. Sometimes they vanished altogether. Cost and labour seemed irrelevant, and were excluded from accounting. The ways in which the data were collected and the methods used to produce the official statistics were never published. Sceptical statisti-

cians found huge discrepancies. But dreamers around the world were dazzled. In every domain, it seemed, the People's Republic was surging forward.<sup>2</sup>

Besides mere numbers, the very imagery of revolution had romantic appeal. There were mass rallies on Tiananmen every year, as the regime paraded its resources in iron, steel, flesh and blood. Tanks and rocket launchers rumbled by, with fighter jets screaming overhead, as a never-ending procession of drummers, dancers and workers waved olive branches or released doves and coloured balloons. 'Even the tiny Mongol ponies of the Cavalry trotted precisely in step, like an articulated clockwork toy,' noted one foreign visitor in sheer amazement, standing in the midst of an ecstatic crowd. And a sea of red could be seen even outside mass parades in Beijing. Scarlet, the symbol of a revolution for basic rights and equality, was everywhere, on banners, flags, scarves, ties and armbands. The iconography of socialism was simple and enduring, with its sheaths of wheat, its rising sun in gold and its ubiquitous red star. Workers and peasants, with raised hands or clenched fists, seemed almost to jump out of the posters so liberally plastered on the walls of many buildings. What could be more evocative of progress than the image of a young girl with pigtails proudly driving a tractor through the fields? When Cai Shuli and thirty other graduates from a high school in Beijing heard of a young girl named Liu Ying, resolutely steering a tractor through the fields of the Great Northern Wilderness, their imaginations were so fired that they volunteered to go north: 'The stirring in our hearts is impossible to describe,' she wrote to Mayor Peng Zhen, 'and we have decided to offer our youth to the Great Northern Wilderness to reclaim the rich soil together with comrade Liu Ying.'<sup>3</sup>

There was also a flow of reports, statements and announcements from the leadership, not to mention the writings of the Chairman himself. These could be impenetrable to outsiders, replete as they were with Marxist-Leninist jargon, not to mention cryptic hints at changes in the power structure of the communist party. But they also conveyed a sense of purpose and commitment, pledging better wages for workers, promising more homes for the disabled or resolving to fight for the dignity of ethnic minorities. There was no end to statements of good intent, accompanied by ever more decrees, rules and regulations that would nudge China forward on the road to communism. It was all about the world in the making, not the world as it was. It was a world of plans, blueprints and models. Even more prominent than the official literature were the many slogans intended to galvanise a broader audience. Mao himself was a master of powerful, stirring quotations that

found their way into every household in China, whether it was ‘Women Hold up Half the Sky’, ‘Revolution is Not a Dinner Party’ or ‘Imperialism is a Paper Tiger’. His was the motto ‘Serve the People’, calling out from posters and placards everywhere, the white characters written in a flamboyant hand against a red background.

Like Cai Shuli, who pledged to help reclaim the Great Northern Wilderness, plenty of party members looked past the misery of the present to see a radiant future beckoning ahead. Dan Ling, who had joined the party as a schoolboy just before liberation, was still imbued with the idealism of youth several years later, despite his doubts over some of the campaigns against enemies of the state. Li Zhisui, now working as the Chairman’s doctor, had also grown wiser since setting foot on shore with his wife in 1949, but he remained an ardent believer. Even outside the privileged ranks of the party, the whole idea of ‘building socialism’ was taken to heart, especially by a younger generation that went through the new schools set up after liberation. A sense of adventure combined with boundless idealism when young students volunteered to go off as pioneers to border regions or distant irrigation projects. The key to understanding the appeal of communism, despite the grim reality on the ground, lay in the fact that it allowed so many followers to believe that they were participants in an historic process of transformation, contributing to something much bigger and better than themselves, or anything that had come before. In a world full of workers who set new records and soldiers who used their bodies to block enemy fire, everyone was encouraged to become a hero. The propaganda machine ceaselessly glorified heroic workers, peasants and soldiers, held up as so many models for emulation.<sup>4</sup>

Just as there were model workers and soldiers, there were model schools, hospitals, factories, offices, prisons, homes and co-operatives. These offered a glimpse of the future, a vision of the world to be. By 1956 thousands of foreign visitors were carefully selected by the regime and taken on guided tours to visit these showcase sites, all expenses paid, surrounded by minders who controlled their every movement. One guest wrote that ‘one gets to feel something like an infant in transit from one country to another and being passed from one hand to another’. But many were happy to be herded around, all too ready to help dispel the misinformation and hostile stereotypes that existed abroad about communism in the People’s Republic.<sup>5</sup>

Foreign pilgrims were allowed to interview only the most loyal and tested party members. Rong Yiren, who could no longer rely on the protection of senior leaders after the purge of Pan Hannian in Shanghai, decided

to join the show. It was one way to become indispensable to the regime. He turned himself into a showcase industrialist, paid to conjure up a world of illusions. Foreign visitors to his home would find his wife contentedly knitting a sweater. Two dogs frisked about merrily in the garden, where a nurse in uniform could be seen wheeling a baby across the lawn. 'On a wall, a crucifix discreetly suggested freedom of worship. The bookshelves showed Shakespeare as well as Marx.' In an adjacent room his daughter practised the piano. Most of the conversation was about his garden, as if he had nothing more to worry about than the correct fertiliser for his peonies. One French visitor who witnessed this touching tableau was truly awed: 'I have never seen a more contented family,' she said. Rong had an answer to every question. When pressed and asked how he could be so happy, he would purse his lips and consider the question gravely: 'I *was* worried at first,' he would confess. 'When the Communists liberated Shanghai, we were apprehensive, if not for our lives, at least for our property.' Then he would look his guest in the eye, his voice ringing with sincerity. 'But the Communists have kept their promise. We have come to realise that the Chinese Communists never deceive people.'<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the country, countless shows were put on for the benefit of foreign journalists, visiting statesmen, ranking leaders, student groups and, of course, the Chairman himself. As hundreds of Buddhist temples were destroyed, large sums of money were lavished on a handful of structures where showpiece monks could lecture about a religious renaissance in the New China. In model factories equipped with the latest technology, workers were carefully picked and trained to illustrate the triumphs of the planned economy. Around all major cities, model villages were selected to showcase the benefits of collectivisation. Everywhere, or so it appeared, people worked hard and were enthusiastic, never tiring of praising the party. In the propaganda state nothing was as it seemed.<sup>7</sup>

China was a theatre. Even outside the tourist circuit, people were required to smile. When farmers were asked to surrender a greater share of their crop, they had to do so enthusiastically, with fanfare. When shopkeepers were required to hand over their assets to the state, they had to do so voluntarily, with beaming faces. A smile, in China as in other parts of Asia, did not always mean joy; it could convey embarrassment or hide pain and anger. But, more importantly, nobody wished to be accused of dragging their feet. Most people depended on the state for their livelihood. And all had spent countless hours in study sessions since liberation, learning how to parrot the party line, provide the correct answers and create the illusion of con-

sent. Ordinary people may not all have been great heroes, but many were great actors.

Huge resources were poured into this giant Potemkin village. One lasting result was the immense strides made in transportation. A network of communications tied the country together as never before. Highways reached out to every destination, many of them paved by conscript labour and chain gangs. Trains ran on time, as exclusive sleeping berths with dining facilities delivered foreign guests and leading officials to their destinations. Many cities were spruced up, the drains cleaned and the roads swept regularly.

In the capital splendid public buildings shot up like mushrooms after the rain, rising far above a sea of grey roofs of courtyard houses and the rose-red walls of the imperial city. Ministries, institutes and museums appeared in the centre and on the outskirts, some with vast curving roofs of glazed tiles, others with plain flat ones, but all inspired by a Russian predilection for monumental proportions. In one district alone, dozens of buildings sprang up, seemingly within the space of a few months, from the Institute of Aeronautics and the Oil Institute to the Institute of Metallurgy, all with spacious forecourts and extensive wings. Outside Xizhimen, the north-western gate of the ancient city wall, a Soviet Union Exhibition Hall soon appeared. Rumours circulated about the amount of pure gold used to gild its towering spire. In the heart of the capital, Tiananmen Square was cleared of many of its ancient structures to make way for the annual parades. Most of the city wall that hindered traffic was dismantled.<sup>8</sup>

Big, tangible symbols of power also went up in other cities, as the machinery of the central government was duplicated at the provincial level, complete with all the showcase buildings and prestige projects that accompanied an expanding state. In Chongqing, a sprawling city built on hills often veiled in drizzle and mist, a beautiful concert hall was erected in the middle of the People's Cultural Park. A large sports stadium soon followed, as well as an Assembly Hall. A huge and ornate building with three circular tiers of green-glazed roof, the latter cost an estimated 100,000 yuan per year to maintain, although it was apparently seldom used. Many other new buildings stood empty, as Chongqing was no longer the capital of Sichuan. Further north, in Zhengzhou, an entirely new city seemed to rise out of the wheat fields, far away from the old town, with a broad boulevard flanked by large administrative buildings, all with their own gardens and dormitories. In Lanzhou, the arid capital of Gansu, new government offices appeared for several kilometres on either side of the Yangzi, almost doubling the area of

the city with new institutes, hospitals, factories and residential blocks. The new streets, built by pick and shovel, were wide enough to have lanes on both sides for slower-moving traffic. They were straight as an arrow, cutting through older thoroughfares without any regard for the past.<sup>2</sup>

Everywhere the speed of construction was startling. The leadership was in a rush to catch up with the future. As a result, many buildings were erected in a ‘haphazard, wild manner’, without much planning. As local leaders tried to outdo each other in building ever larger facilities, many new structures came without running water and sewerage facilities. Where cities were built outside the centre, as in Zhengzhou, the cost of building roads and services sank a hole in the budget. And in the haste to catapult the country into communism, the most basic steps such as surveys of the local topography, the composition of the soil and the distribution of water were ignored, resulting in costly errors. In some cases newly built roads were ceaselessly torn up, as different local authorities became locked in legal battles to extract compensation from each other. Even in Beijing, the foundations of entire factories subsided, while load-bearing beams warped and split. The waste was enormous. In the empire of central planning, nothing seemed planned.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, even some centrepieces of the Potemkin project, designed to awe and woo foreign guests, were deeply flawed. Behind a gleaming façade of socialist modernity lay a ramshackle world of shoddy construction. The Qianmen Hotel in Beijing was one of three new venues built to host foreign delegations. By 1956 it was a favourite haunt of goodwill visitors. The taps dripped, leaving stains in sinks and tubs. Water in the toilets ran constantly, sometimes overflowing the tanks. Doors did not fit properly, light bulbs flickered, windows refused to close.<sup>11</sup>

As vast amounts of money were ploughed into prestige buildings, the housing of ordinary people was neglected – with the exception of model dormitories built for show, for instance student accommodation at Peking University or the People’s Mansion in Xi’an. Factories and dormitories were jumbled together, often with no regard for basic standards of hygiene. Local people often complained that ‘the dead and the living are being continuously evicted’. Much housing was drab, built like military barracks, with row after row of low units, all identical and more often than not without any leisure facilities. It was badly constructed too. In the suburbs of the capital, away from the public gaze, housing for workers was built with reject material. Walls moved when they were touched, door frames collapsed after one storm, and rain dripped through the roof. In Nanyuan, a suburb about 13 kilometres south of the Imperial Palace, water dripped



from the walls in new residential units. Some houses came without doors. This, too, was a conscious choice. As Liu Shaoqi put it in his instructions to the Ministry of Textile Industry in February 1956, ‘You must build single-storey dormitories for the workers, not multi-storey ones. Our workers are not necessarily used to multi-storey buildings, in future we can build good multi-storey buildings. And you don’t necessarily have to build those structures very well, if they are slightly better than temporary sheds then it should be acceptable, anyway in future they will be demolished.’ A few trees he deemed acceptable, but ponds, rockeries, flowers and grass were unnecessary. Even providing workers with teacups, as was the habit in the Capital Number Two Cotton Mill, was ‘too good’. This was part of a new drive for austerity, as the government periodically had to cut back on spending.<sup>12</sup>

The housing problem was compounded by the fact that local governments, in thrall to gigantism, were keen to eliminate their existing stock. The scale of destruction was staggering. According to Li Fuchun, housing with a total surface area of over 2 million square metres had been erased in Beijing, Wuhan, Taiyuan and Lanzhou since 1949, at a cost of 60 million yuan. A fifth of Taiyuan and Lanzhou was wiped from the map. In Sichuan, from the provincial capital down to county seats, up to 40 per cent of the urban surface was reduced to rubble. The local people compared the land to tofu, the party to a sharp knife: it cut off whichever portion it wanted. Those who were evicted were often left with no accommodation, even in Beijing. Residents cleared from the area around the Dongjiao Railway Station were put up in temporary sheds for ten months. Some of them cried as they shivered in the snow. Everywhere there was a housing shortage.<sup>13</sup>

Many workers therefore lived in appalling conditions. In Anshan, the site of a sprawling iron and steel complex in Manchuria where the glow from the blast furnaces turned the night an eerie red, the dormitories were so inadequate that families of six had to share one bed. Occasionally a roof caved in or a wall collapsed, forcing workers to live in animal pens or dark caves on the eastern fringes of the city, in the mountains where the coal and iron was mined. Some went hungry, and could be seen shuffling along the streets at the end of their shift, begging for food. Lack of clothing and heating was widespread, even though temperatures plunged to an average of minus 20 degrees Celsius in the winter. When an icy blanket of snow covered the city, the cold seeped through flimsy buildings, threadbare blankets and torn quilts, freezing some babies to death – or so the Anshan Party Committee wrote in a confidential report.<sup>14</sup>

Further south, in Nanjing, the workforce had more than doubled since liberation, but overall living space had failed to keep pace, meaning that each worker had to be content with an average of 2 square metres. Dormitories often lacked ventilation, so people woke up with headaches caused by lack of oxygen. But they were the lucky ones, as government accommodation was reserved for single workers. Families lived outside the factory premises, often up to 25 kilometres away, meaning that many hours were wasted on the daily commute – not counting the expense of 40 cents a day for a mere dozen kilometres, a rate that would have exhausted the entire monthly allowance of 10 per cent of the population in just over a week.<sup>15</sup>

Just south of Nanjing, in the industrial city of Ma'anshan, lying on the bank of the Yangzi River, workers were sick for months on end, unable to afford even basic medical care. The dormitories were crowded, although pressure on housing also meant that some families lived in sheds so exposed to the elements that even in winter a fire could not be started. Ragged urchins were seen begging in the streets. Some workshops even lacked drinking water. There were no toilets. Leading cadres were too busy meeting production targets to care about the workforce. As the workers put it, 'they do not send us hardship funds, they send us only burial fees'.<sup>16</sup>

More detailed studies show that the average space per worker shrank inexorably after liberation, sometimes by half (see Table 2, p. 269). In Wuhan it was 2.4 metres, although this figure excluded a quarter of the workforce who lived in sheds and huts. The city that was home to 1.9 million people had 80,000 workers without a roof above their heads. These were the numbers crunched by the Bureau for Statistics. According to the Bureau for Labour, everywhere ordinary people suffered from a chronic shortage of housing.<sup>17</sup>

People beamed with health, at least when they appeared in propaganda posters, peering confidently into the future. The numerous statistics that the regime churned out on every aspect of health and hygiene, from the number of flies that had been swatted to the incidence of cholera in the countryside, encouraged an image of unceasing progress. Health campaigns punctuated daily life, as people were mobilised at intervals to sweep the streets, remove rubbish, kill rats or fill cesspools. During the Patriotic Health Campaign in 1952, as the country was on a war footing against enemy germs, battalions of conscripted citizens had disinfected entire cities. Much of the campaign, as the Ministry of Health admitted, turned out to be wasteful, as Chapter 7 showed.

But there were real gains. China had always had huge health-care problems, in particular in the countryside where schistosomiasis (an intestinal disease which attacked the liver and spleen), hookworm and beriberi were common. Infant mortality was high before liberation, and there were few modern doctors, except in the big cities. Some improvements of the 1950s were due to new medical breakthroughs. After the Second World War, for instance, mass production of penicillin began in many countries, bringing a steady decline in the number of bacterial infections. The end of more than a decade of war helped other aspects of public health in China. Piles of garbage that had accumulated in many cities during the civil war were removed. Streets were cleaned, trenches filled, drainage improved. Inoculation became widespread, even if it was forcibly performed by cadres keen to fill their quotas. Most of all, the one-party state mobilised its resources against devastating epidemics, many of which were brought under control soon after they appeared.

But health care was not free. The much flaunted barefoot doctors, trained to bring basic health care to the countryside, only appeared years later during the Cultural Revolution. And much medical help that farmers would have received from non-governmental sources before liberation vanished, sometimes overnight. Hundreds of mission hospitals scattered throughout the countryside were liquidated. Taoist and Buddhist temples, along with other religious or charitable institutions, were closed down, except for a few under government control. Everywhere pharmacists, doctors and nurses had to jump through the hoops, demonstrating their allegiance to the new regime as one campaign of thought reform succeeded another. And everywhere, by 1956, the state had taken over most companies, including retail pharmacies and private clinics.

Whatever improvements may have followed liberation, health was soon on the decline. Published reports and newspaper articles described great strides in health care, but far more critical surveys, quietly filed away in the archives, reveal a picture of chronic malnutrition and poor health. This was true not only of the countryside, where collectivisation had reduced the farmers to the status of serfs, but also of the cities. One reason was the decline in income for most workers across the country. Just as farmers had to live on increasingly smaller rations of grain, workers had to make do with dwindling salaries. But health care involved considerable costs, and medicine was expensive. The Bureau for Labour, which studied hundreds of factories in 1956, concluded that 'over the past few years the real income of workers has followed a downward trend'. Inflation outpaced wages. About

half of all workers in heavy industry failed to make even 50 yuan a month. The proportion was higher in light industry. In Beijing one in six workers barely managed to scrape a living, making less than 10 yuan a month for basic expenses. And below them, in the shadowy world of construction, dwelled an underclass of paupers who made up 40 per cent of the workforce. Health everywhere was on the decline, as disease rates inched up year after year. By 1955 almost one in every twenty workers had to take sick leave for more than six months. In some factories 40 per cent of workers suffered from a serious chronic illness, although few could afford to take rest – despite the propaganda about workers’ sanatoria and holiday retreats.<sup>18</sup>

Conditions were much worse outside the capital. In Nanjing a worker earning less than 20 yuan a month for himself was unable to afford anything beyond the most basic daily necessities. But in 1956 one in ten people throughout the city lived in sheer destitution, making no more than 7 yuan a month. This was despite the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of undesirables in the years after liberation. Half of these paupers were people impoverished as a result of collectivisation. They ranged from unemployed rickshaw pullers and small shopkeepers hounded out of their trade to the family members of victims denounced as counter-revolutionaries. Some were workers fired from state enterprises, often for the slightest infraction of labour discipline. These people were marked for life, becoming untouchables, pariahs living on the margins of society, unable to find another job.

Among workers in Nanjing, more than 7 per cent suffered from tuberculosis, 6 per cent had stomach ailments, another 6 per cent high blood pressure. Poisoning and work accidents were common. In the Nanjing Chemical Factory the concentration of harmful particles in the air exceeded the Soviet Union’s limit by a factor of 36. In the workshop dealing with saltpetre, ‘100 per cent of the workers, to varying degrees, suffer from poisoning,’ some of the worst cases causing an enlarged liver and spleen. Lungs infected with siliceous dust were common in glass and cement factories, while the number of trachoma and nose infections was ‘serious’.<sup>19</sup>

Comparisons with the years before liberation are fraught with difficulty, if only because so few detailed studies based on archival evidence are available. But the regime itself was keen to compare itself with its predecessor, and it enrolled its statisticians to come up with detailed, inflation-adjusted studies that went back to 1937, the peak of the nationalist era just before the onset of the Japanese invasion. Most were never published, and for good reason. They showed that in many cases life had been better two decades

earlier. Workers in the Shenxin Textile Factory in Hankou, for instance, saw a steep decline in the amount of grain, pork and oil they could consume as well as the quantity of cloth they could buy after the revolution. By 1957, on average, a worker had an extra 6 kilos of grain per year, but almost half less pork, a third less edible oil and a fifth less cloth when compared with 1937. Many were malnourished. As Table 2 shows, the situation was hardly unique to that single factory, as workers were badly fed, badly clothed and badly housed, often in conditions not even equivalent to 1948, the height of the civil war.

Table 2: Average Annual Consumption and Living Space for Workers in Wuhan, 1937–57

	Grain (kilos)	Pork (kilos)	Oil (kilos)	Cloth (metres)	Housing (square metres)
Zhenyi Cotton Mill					
1937	157	8.8	7	10.6	6.5
1948	150	2.8	4.5	4.2	2.7
1952	161	7.8	7.3	8.7	3.9
1957	147	5.2	5	6	3.9

#### Hankou Battery Factory

1937	170	12.5	8.5	8	4
1948	164	10.7	7.7	8.3	2.8
1952	153	7.2	6.6	5.8	2.1
1957	135	5	4.3	3.9	2.8

#### Wuchang Power Engine Factory

1937	172	6.7	5.9	7.2	4.6
1948	197	6.6	4.1	4.6	3.9
1952	151	7.8	9.3	6	4.4
1957	127	5	3.9	4.7	4.1

# Wuchang Shipyard

1937	159	8	5.5	7	5
1948	146	6.5	7	4.7	4
1952	167	6.5	6.5	10	4
1957	146	5	4	7	4

Source: Hubei, 28 March 1958, SZ44-2-158, pp. 24, 38, 47 and 59

Even when by 1952 workers had witnessed some improvements, conditions invariably went downhill in the following five years. But these statistics mentioned only consumption, not the overall cost of living. From 1952 to 1957 living expenses went resolutely upwards. For the workers in the Shenxin Textile Factory mentioned above, the rent increased from 88 yuan a year in 1952 to 400 yuan five years later. In every factory surveyed by the Bureau for Statistics the trend was clear: average living space shrank while the rent crept up. In the Wuchang Shipyard, included in Table 2, rent rose from 271 yuan in 1948 to 361 yuan in 1952, then doubled to 721 yuan in 1955 and reached a phenomenal 990 yuan in 1957.<sup>20</sup>

Malnourishment and poor health were also common in schools. The Youth League, after a wide-ranging survey of middle-school students, declared that ‘their health is very bad’. In Wuhan, each received 300 grams of vegetables and 150 grams of bean products a month. Rough grains and sweet potatoes constituted the rest of the diet. In the entire province of Henan, no vegetables were served for a full month, with the food consisting of nothing but noodles. In Mianyang, Sichuan, students captured their diet in a popular ditty: ‘Rice is rare, it’s soup we get, the more you eat, the slimmer you get, the food is bad, the taste the same, there is no salt and there is no oil.’ In Liaoning province, one in three students was undernourished. In Yingkou, the busy port where the province’s maize, soybeans, apples and pears left by sea, students would regularly faint with hunger in physical education classes. Strict rationing was justified in the name of morality, as ‘eating too much grain is wasteful and lacking in communist virtue’. Those who went hungry were told to drink water: ‘boiled water also contains calories’. In Xinmin, a city just outside the provincial capital Shenyang, four out of ten students suffered from night blindness, a condition caused by

malnutrition, in particular lack of vitamin A found in fish oils and dairy products. Some classes were held in temples or abandoned churches, although there never seemed to be enough light. Even in daytime, it could be 'as dark as in a prison'.<sup>21</sup>

There were other setbacks. The regime was determined to eradicate disease and eliminate all pests, but this laudable goal was not always well served by mass campaigns that mobilised millions across the country. When people were given a quota of rat tails to be delivered to the authorities, they started breeding the rodents. The whole idea of a military campaign against epidemics, in which people were deployed in battalions, banners unfurled and bugles blaring, ran against common medical practice. This was the case with the drive to eliminate schistosomiasis. The number of people infected by the parasite increased every year after liberation, especially in parts of east China. The leadership ignored the issue. They were more interested in fighting the wasps and butterflies suspected of being infected with germs by enemy agents during the Korean War. Only after the Chairman had been shown the debilitating effects of schistosomiasis during a visit to Zhejiang province in November 1955 did the disease finally win attention from the party. Mao wrote a poem, grandly titled 'Farewell to the Plague Spirit', and in February 1956 he gave the order to start a mass campaign: 'Schistosomiasis must be eliminated!'<sup>22</sup>

Millions of farmers were taken to lakes, crawling through the mud to catch the snails which transmitted the infection. But, all along, leading medical authorities had warned that any attempt to eradicate the disease simply by collecting snails was hopeless. The snails were merely the host of shistosome worms invisible to the human eye. Farmers and cattle who came into contact with the worms were at risk of infection, as the worms propagated themselves in the veins and liver of a parasitised body. Human and animal waste laden with worm eggs was then released back into the lakes, where the cycle was completed as the eggs hatched inside the bodies of the snails. The advice of experts was dismissed at best, denounced as bourgeois at worst. Snails were dug out and collected by hand by whole platoons of villagers. New irrigation canals were opened up in order to block existing ones and bury the snails. The campaign relied on huge manpower, but as soon as it came to an end people were sent back to work in infected lakes to cut grass or collect reeds.<sup>23</sup>

This happened in Hubei, a central province along the Yangzi studded with a thousand lakes with dabbling ducks, lotus and water chestnuts. A third of the population there remained at risk. Despite glowing reports from



local cadres bidding farewell to the plague spirit, more than 1.5 million people were still infected. In Hanchuan county, some 700 cases were cured during the campaign, but over a thousand new cases appeared immediately afterwards. In other provinces too, the archives show that the campaign barely dented the incidence of schistosomiasis. This was a country run by slogans and quotas, with one campaign following on the heels of another. There was little room for patient work in controlling the many dimensions of the disease, including better disposal of human waste. Collectivisation did not help, as people in co-operatives tended to care less for animals that did not belong to them, including the proper disposal of manure. Traditional rules of hygiene, including drinking boiled water and eating hot food, also suffered when people lived at the beck and call of party officials.<sup>24</sup>

In some cases a more frightening gap appeared between the world of propaganda and the reality on the ground. The People's Republic enacted a stream of praiseworthy policies for the victims of leprosy, including the provision of leper colonies fitted with every possible amenity. Eliminating leprosy would have been an enormously complex task for any government at the time, all the more so since lepers were widely stigmatised. But in the People's Republic local cadres could barely feed their own workforce. They had many other priorities, lowest among which were disfigured people suffering from a disease erroneously thought to be highly infectious. Prejudice was rampant, and a few educational pamphlets on the disease, distributed by the health authorities, were not about to change that situation overnight. A great deal of evidence buried in the party archives suggests that the situation actually became worse in the years following liberation, if only because the one-party state vested so much more power in local cadres than would ever have been possible in the past.

As missionaries were forced out of the country, sometimes existing leper colonies found themselves cut off from foreign funds. In Moxi, a deprived area high up in the mountains in Sichuan, they abandoned not only a church that proudly displayed its colourful bell tower, but also a leper colony with 160 patients, who were left to fend for themselves. Nobody came to their rescue, despite pleas for help. Soon some patients started leaving the colony to beg along the twisted, rutted mountain roads. Few were welcome. Some were hounded and beaten by frightened villagers. Several were buried alive. A report from the provincial health authorities stated: 'Again one leper was buried alive in the summer of 1954 in Yongding county; similar circumstances also appeared in other counties.' This was not confined to Sichuan alone. In neighbouring Guizhou, often rocked by rebellions from the minor-

ity people who lived in the hills and highlands that dominate the province, the number of infections increased sharply after liberation. As panic spread through the villages, some of the local cadres decided to burn the victims to death. This occurred on more than one occasion, one of the worst cases being a village where eight lepers perished at the stake. In some cases the militia acted on the orders of the local authorities: 'The militia tied up a leper and burned him to death. His parents cried all day and night.'<sup>25</sup>

But the worst episode was probably in Yongren county, Yunnan, where a hundred lepers were set alight in June 1951. The idea was first proposed in a conference held by the county party committee a month earlier. Ma Xueshou, a high-ranking cadre in charge of rural affairs, proposed: 'The lepers from the hospital in the fourth district often come out to wash and run about, it creates a bad impression among the masses, and they demand that they be burned.' 'We cannot burn them,' answered the county party secretary. But Ma insisted, and a month later he volunteered to take full responsibility: 'If the masses want to burn them, then let's burn them, we should do it for the masses, it is their request, just do it and I will assume responsibility.' Several others agreed. So the militia assembled all the lepers, locked them in the hospital and set the building on fire. The victims screamed for help, to no avail. Only six of 110 victims survived.<sup>26</sup>

Even when lepers received care, funds mysteriously disappeared. Who, after all, could call to account a few cadres looking after lepers in colonies far from the party centre? In Yanbian, Sichuan, the men in charge appropriated most of the available funds to build themselves spacious mansions. The mud huts for the patients, several kilometres further inland against the mountains, were so ramshackle that they were in imminent danger of collapse. But the problem was also one of scale. In all Guangdong province, by 1953 there were an estimated 100,000 lepers, although the medical authorities could afford to take care of only 2,000 cases.<sup>27</sup>

Lepers were among the most vulnerable members of society, and their needs were not served well by a one-party state that sought to control everyone but answered to nobody. But there were many other needy members of society whose fates came to lie entirely in the hands of local cadres. In some orphanages taken over from non-governmental organisations, the death rate stood at 30 per cent. The blind and the elderly found it difficult to fit into a new society where so much depended on the ability to take orders and earn work points. With the gradual stripping away of most basic liberties – freedom of expression, belief, assembly, association and movement – the

majority of ordinary people became increasingly defenceless, as very little stood between them and the state.<sup>28</sup>

By 1956 many of the hopes that sprang from liberation years earlier had been dashed. Instead of treating people with respect, the state viewed them as mere digits on a balance sheet, a resource to be exploited for the greater good. Farmers had lost their land, their tools and their livestock in the name of collectivisation. They were forced to deliver ever larger shares of the crop to the state, answering the call of the bugle in the morning to follow orders from local cadres. In factories and shops in the cities, employees were treated more like bonded labour than the working-class heroes featured in official propaganda. They were pressed into working ever longer hours, chasing one production record after another even as their benefits steadily declined. Everybody, except those inside the party, had to tighten their belts in the pursuit of utopia. China was a country seething with discontent. Social strains were about to explode into open opposition to the regime.

## Poisonous Weeds

A turning point in the communist world came in the early morning of 25 February 1956. On the final day of the Twentieth Congress, as foreign delegates were busy packing their bags, Nikita Khrushchev assembled the Soviet representatives for an unscheduled secret session in the Great Kremlin Palace, the Moscow residence of the Russian tsars. In a four-hour speech delivered without interruption, Khrushchev denounced the regime of suspicion, fear and terror created by Stalin. Launching a devastating attack on his former master, he accused him of being personally responsible for brutal purges, mass deportations, executions without trial and the torture of innocent party loyalists. Khrushchev further assailed Stalin for his ‘mania for greatness’ and the cult of personality he had fostered during his reign. Members of the audience listened in stunned silence. There was no applause at the end, as many of the delegates left in a state of shock.<sup>1</sup>

Copies of the speech were sent to foreign communist parties. It set off a chain reaction. In Beijing the Chairman was forced on to the defensive. Mao was China’s Stalin, the great leader of the People’s Republic. The secret speech could only raise questions about his own leadership, in particular the adulation surrounding him. DeStalinisation was nothing short of a challenge to Mao’s own authority. Just as Khrushchev pledged to return his country to the Politburo, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and others in Beijing spoke out in favour of the principles of collective leadership. At the Eighth Party Congress in September 1956, a reference to Mao Zedong Thought was removed from the party charter, collective leadership was lauded and the cult of personality decried. Hemmed in by Khrushchev, Mao had little choice but to put a brave face on these measures, even contributing to them in the months prior to the congress. But the Chairman did not hide his anger when he spoke to Li Zhisui, accusing Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping of taking control of the agenda and pushing him into the background.<sup>2</sup>

Khrushchev also accused Stalin of ruining agriculture in the 1930s, even though he ‘never went anywhere, never met with workers and collective farmers’ and knew the country only from ‘films that dressed up and prettified the

situation in the countryside'. This, too, must have been too close to the bone for a Chairman who viewed the country from the comfort of his private train, passing through stations emptied of all but security personnel. Khrushchev's scathing comments on the failure of collective farming seemed like unintended criticism of the Socialist High Tide. Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun listened to the prompts from Moscow and tried to slow down the pace of collectivisation, calling in the summer of 1956 for an end to 'rash advances'. They reduced the size of collective farms, reverted to a limited free market and allowed greater scope for private production. Mao saw this as a personal challenge. Atop an editorial of the *People's Daily* criticising the High Tide for 'attempting to do all things overnight', forwarded to him for his approval, Mao angrily scrawled, 'I will not read this.' He later wondered, 'Why should I read something that abuses me?' In a severe personal setback, the Socialist High Tide was scrapped at the Eighth Party Congress.<sup>3</sup>

The secret speech also prompted calls for reform in Eastern Europe. In Poland, workers took to the streets in Poznań, protesting over higher work quotas and demanding better wages. In June 1956 a large crowd of over 100,000 gathered near the Imperial Castle occupied by the secret police and overwhelmed the premises, freeing all prisoners and seizing firearms. The headquarters of the communist party was ransacked. Soviet forces were called in, including tanks, armoured cars and field guns as well as more than 10,000 soldiers. Shots were fired at the demonstrators, killing up to a hundred and injuring many more. But the Polish United Workers' Party, as the communist party was named, soon turned to conciliation under the leadership of Władysław Gomułka, raising wages and promising other political and economic reforms. It was the start of an era known as the Gomułka thaw, as communists tried to find a 'Polish way to socialism'.

A few months later a rebellion broke out in Hungary, with thousands of students marching through the streets of Budapest. As a delegation tried to enter the radio building of the parliament to broadcast their demands to the nation, they were shot at by the public security police. Violence erupted throughout the country, as pitched battles took place between demonstrators and the police. Moscow tried to restore order by sending thousands of Soviet troops and tanks to the capital. Incensed, the population took to the streets and turned against the regime. In the narrow, cobbled streets of Budapest, rebels fought the tanks with Molotov cocktails. Revolutionary councils appeared across Hungary, seizing power from local authorities and clamouring for a general strike. Everywhere the insurgents smashed the

hallowed symbols of communism, burning books, stripping red stars from buildings and tearing down memorials from their pedestals, including the large bronze statue of Stalin in Városliget, the main park in Budapest. By the end of the month, most Soviet troops had been forced to withdraw from the city. Imre Nagy, the new premier, formed a coalition government. Political prisoners were released. Non-communist parties that had been banned were now allowed and joined the coalition.

For a few brief days, Moscow appeared to tolerate the new government. But on 31 October Hungary declared that it intended to leave the Warsaw Pact. The same day violence erupted again near the party headquarters in Budapest, as a crowd grabbed members of the secret police and hung them from lampposts. The scene was shown on Soviet newsreels a few hours later. Khrushchev, who was spending the week in Stalin's dacha in the comfortable Lenin Hills overlooking downtown Moscow, agonised all night, fearful that the rebellion might spread to neighbouring countries and prompt the collapse of the Soviet bloc. He and his colleagues reversed their decision. On 4 November a large Soviet force invaded Hungary, killing thousands of rebels. Over 200,000 refugees fled across the border. Mass arrests were carried out over several months, as all public opposition was suppressed.

The events triggered by deStalinisation were eagerly followed in China. In October 1956, Gomulka gave a dramatic speech that was reproduced in full in Beijing, promising 'socialism with freedom'. He revealed that collectives in Poland produced much less than privately owned farms. But, for many readers in China, Gomulka's remarks about the Soviet Union were the real bombshell. Poland was in debt because it had been forced to sell cheaply to the Soviet Union but pay dearly for imports. It seemed that the Russians were guilty of 'imperialist exploitation'. And just when speculation over the Polish situation reached its height, news came of the Hungarian revolt, creating even more excitement in China. 'For the first time,' observed Robert Loh, 'newspapers were read avidly. Previously, we had been forced to read them because the official press items were used as discussion topics in our regular mass organization meetings. Now, however, absenteeism soared while workers waited in block-long queues for a chance to buy a paper.' People had to read between the lines, as the news was severely censored, but workers started invoking the example of Hungary in acts of defiance against the state.<sup>4</sup>

Discontented people in all walks of life started taking to the streets. They were fed up, striking, demonstrating or petitioning the government for a

whole variety of reasons. Students boycotted classes in schools and institutes of higher learning throughout the country. In the Nanjing Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, built in 1952 on the site of an old Ming palace, over 3,000 students went on strike for a month in the autumn of 1956. The college had advertised itself as a leading university but was no more than a middle-ranking technical institute. A few streets away, in Nanjing Normal University, the situation also took a turn for the worse after the Public Security Bureau sheltered six students guilty of beating up a young man who had accidentally bumped into them. Soon calls for justice rang out from the campus. The police threatened to arrest the demonstrators for 'starting a rebellion', prompting 480 students to gather in front of the mayor's office chanting slogans in favour of democracy and human rights. Nanjing was not the only city rocked by unrest. Until the archives are fully open, nobody will know for certain the extent of student discontent, but in just one medium-sized city – Xi'an – workers and students petitioned or went on strike on no fewer than forty separate occasions. By early 1957 over 10,000 students were up in arms all across the country.<sup>5</sup>

Workers went on strike in unprecedented numbers. The Ministry of Industry counted more than 220 cases in 1956, the majority having started after October. Demonstrations in Shanghai attracted thousands of followers. A few were even led by party officials or members of the Youth League. Most of the workers protested against decreasing real income, poor housing and dwindling welfare benefits. Grievances had been mounting for many years, but what caused the explosion of discontent was the collectivisation of private enterprises under the Socialist High Tide. Outside Shanghai strikes also paralysed entire sectors of the economy. In Manchuria, 2,000 workers in grain transportation deliberately slowed their pace or petitioned the government for pay increases. When party officials retaliated by threatening to treat them as counter-revolutionaries, the strikers became even more determined. In Fuzhou, along the coast opposite Taiwan, workers petitioned the municipal government on sixty occasions.<sup>6</sup>

In the countryside too, discontent with collectivisation mounted throughout 1956. The state had begun to introduce some reforms, reducing the size of collective farms and allowing villagers to trade some produce grown on their own private plots. Farmers, however, wanted the right to leave the collectives altogether. After a disastrous harvest in the autumn of 1956, everywhere in Xianju county, Zhejiang, villagers started making trouble. They withdrew from the collectives, clamoured against the party and beat up local cadres who stood in their way. Over a hundred collectives



collapsed altogether. In Tai county, Jiangsu, thousands of petitioners approached the party headquarters with grievances, as whole parts of the economy in the region reverted back to barter trade in the wake of collectivisation. Villagers left the collectives in droves, some with their own cattle, seed and tools, determined to make it on their own.<sup>7</sup>

In Guangdong tens of thousands of farmers were leaving the collectives by the winter of 1956–7, with the damage most pronounced in Zhongshan and Shunde counties. In some of the Shunde villages, up to a third of the people forcibly took back the land and started planting their own crops. They beat cadres who tried to intervene. In the Zhanjiang region, covering several counties, one out of every fifteen villagers was courageous enough to quit, in the full knowledge that they would become the target of violence from the militia, who dragged away their cattle and refused their children access to schools. Some were not even allowed to walk on the main streets. In Xinyi county irate farmers destroyed collective property, set fire to grain stores and even took knives to collective meetings, threatening party officials who refused to let them go.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the local cadres even started speaking out against collectivisation. ‘Life in a co-operative is worse than in a labour camp,’ opined one. In Shantou, also in Guangdong, some party officials described the grain monopoly as a system of exploitation worse than the feudalism of the past. In Bao’an county, 60 per cent of cadres opposed the monopoly. A deputy secretary of Luoding county said the following about the collectives: ‘Before I went to the countryside I believed in the superiority of the co-operatives, but once I got there and ate gruel I became so hungry that my head spun, so I no longer feel that there is anything superior about it.’ At a party meeting in Yingde county, several participants openly expressed the view that the economy had been in better shape before 1949. In Yaxian county (Sanya), over forty leading cadres and their families followed the farmers in refusing to join the co-operatives. One head of a co-operative in Yangjiang county accused the party of having failed to provide farmers with anything more than gruel in the three years since the monopoly had been introduced. At a higher level, among the 14,264 cadres of eleven counties which made up the Huiyang region, over 10,000 were described as ‘confused’ in their thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Some villagers – with or without the connivance of local cadres – made it all the way to the capital, despite the restrictions the household-registration system imposed on their freedom of movement. At any one time there were dozens of petitioners gathered outside the State Council, seeking re-

dress in an act of last resort. In one case a woman with four emaciated infants approached the main gate with a sign strapped to her body: it read 'starvation', a stark term of accusation against a regime that had promised that nobody would die of hunger. On another occasion a man lit a lantern in broad daylight and approached the main gate of the party headquarters at Zhongnanhai seeking an audience with Chairman Mao. His unmistakable message was that the communist party was an agent of darkness which had shrouded the land.<sup>10</sup>

Other groups of protesters reached the capital. Since liberation, 5.7 million soldiers had been demobilised, but they harboured many grievances. At best they were abandoned to their own fate in the countryside, but during collectivisation many were treated like pariahs, unable as they were to earn their keep. Half a million suffered from chronic diseases, although the regime showed little interest in their medical needs. Their anger spilled over in the winter of 1956–7, as large groups congregated in the cities to put pressure on the local authorities. A few organised revolutionary committees, promising with some bravado to launch a guerrilla campaign. Chen Zonglin, who hailed from a region ravaged by famine in Anhui, argued loudly: 'if the government does not give us jobs we will fight them to the end!' On five separate occasions groups of veterans camped in front of the State Council to press their demands.<sup>11</sup>

Observing the strikes in Shanghai, Robert Loh felt that 'One could feel new life flowing back into the beaten-down people, and it was indescribably exhilarating. Equally indescribable was the changed attitude of the communist officials. They were confused as well as frightened, and their arrogance was gone. They tried to placate everyone, especially the workers whom always they seemed to fear the most.' For good reason, the cadres were in no position to suppress the strikes. The Chairman himself defended the democratic right of students, workers and peasants to express themselves and take to the streets. He had become a champion of the people, allowing a hundred flowers to bloom.<sup>12</sup>

After Khrushchev had delivered his secret speech in February 1956, Mao spent two months carefully considering his position. He had to be cautious with Khrushchev. Not only was he the powerful head of the Soviet bloc, but he had also increased aid to the People's Republic, trying to put relations with Beijing on a new footing after Stalin's death. A year earlier Khrushchev had even promised to provide China with the expertise neces-

sary to make an atomic bomb. The Chairman's hands were also tied as his colleagues proposed to cut back on industrial projects and slow the pace of collectivisation, invoking Khrushchev to rein in his policies.

Mao's response to deStalinisation came on 25 April, when he addressed an enlarged meeting of the Politburo in a speech entitled 'On the Ten Great Relationships'. China, he announced, was ready to strike out on its own, finding a Chinese way to socialism. The Chairman was scathing about those who 'copy everything indiscriminately and transplant it mechanically'. Instead of slavishly following the old Stalinist model, with its lopsided emphasis on heavy industry, China should develop its own version of socialism. The Soviet Union had made a grave mistake by taking too much from the peasants through a system of compulsory sales, but China, he explained, took into account the interests of both peasants and the state by having a very low agricultural tax. He believed that 'We have done better than the Soviet Union and a number of East European countries,' where agriculture and light industry had been neglected. In developing its own road to socialism, China should even learn from capitalist countries. But those who followed Khrushchev in rejecting every aspect of Stalin's legacy were also wrong: 'When the north wind is blowing, they join the north; tomorrow, when there is a west wind blowing, they switch to the west.' 'In the Soviet Union,' he added, 'those who once extolled Stalin to the skies have now in one swoop buried him thirty kilometres deep in the ground.' Mao saw himself as occupying the middle ground, declaring that Stalin was a great Marxist who was 70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong.

The Chairman was seeking consensus, trying to rally his colleagues around him by accommodating many of the objections that had been raised against collectivisation. He stole their agenda by proposing a balance between heavy industry on the one hand and light industry and agriculture on the other. This was necessary 'to ensure the livelihood of the people'. The 'pressing problems in their work and daily life' must be addressed and wages adjusted. Mao championed the ordinary man.

But he went much further than merely making concessions on the economy. Seeking to reclaim moral leadership over the party, he tried to do so by posing as a protector of democratic values. He admonished his colleagues, placing himself above them: 'The Communist Party fears two things: first it fears the people noisily crying like a baby, and secondly it fears the democrats making comments. If what they say makes sense, how can you not listen?' Less than a year earlier, Mao had denounced Liang Shuming and Peng Yihu as 'counter-revolutionaries'. Now he praised them

as the guardians of democracy: ‘We have deliberately kept the democratic parties, we have not knocked them down, nor have we knocked down Liang Shuming or Peng Yihu. We should unite all the people around us, let them abuse us and oppose us. As long as their abuse is reasonable, no matter who says what, we can accept it, it is very useful for the party, the people and socialism.’ He embraced other parties: ‘We should hail two parties, long live the Communist Party, and long live the Democratic Party, but we should not hail the capitalist class, they should have no more than two or three years left.’<sup>13</sup>

Mao outdid Khrushchev. Months earlier he had been forced on the defensive, looking like an ageing leader out of touch with reality and clinging to a model that had failed in the past. Now he, rather than Khrushchev, was the true rebel, striking a far more liberal and conciliatory tone than his counterpart in Moscow. A week later, on 2 May, he encouraged freedom of expression among intellectuals, asking the party to ‘let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend’.

But Mao was still annoyed with his colleagues. He had been compelled to endorse spending cuts and other economic reforms, and there was nothing he could do to block a return to the principles of collective leadership. A few days later he boarded a plane and travelled to the south, trying to bolster support from regional leaders. At the end of May, he sent a warning signal to his inner circle by swimming in the muddy, dangerous Yangzi, the mightiest river in China. He did so on three occasions, despite strong currents and whirlpools, surrounded by his security men. Dr Li Zhisui had to use all his energy to stay afloat. He was a fast learner. He turned around and soon floated along with the Chairman, basking in the sun. By braving the Yangzi, the Chairman had demonstrated his determination to his colleagues. A poem soon followed:

I don't care whether the winds thrash me or the waves pound me,  
I meet them all, more leisurely than strolling in the garden court.<sup>14</sup>

Over the following months Mao continued to approve popular unrest and open discussion of the country's problems. He kept quiet during the Eighth Party Congress, which dropped the Socialist High Tide, deleted all reference to Mao Zedong Thought from the constitution and denounced the cult of personality. He appeared conciliatory, biding his time.

The Hungarian revolt provided him with an opportunity to reclaim the initiative. As Soviet troops crushed the rebels in Budapest in early Novem-

ber, the Chairman faulted the Hungarian Communist Party for having become an ‘aristocratic stratum divorced from the masses’, allowing complaints among the people to fester and run out of control. Mao wanted a purge of the ranks in its Chinese counterpart to avoid a similar fate. What he proposed was nothing less than a new Rectification Campaign, invoking the days of Yan’an when he had compelled every party member to go through the wringer, ferreting out spies and enemy agents. The real dangers, Mao opined in a meeting with his top echelon, were not workers and students demonstrating on the streets, but ‘dogmatism’, ‘bureaucratism’ and ‘subjectivism’ inside the party itself. ‘The party needs to be given some lessons. It is a good thing that students demonstrate against us.’ In 1942, Mao had asked young, idealistic volunteers to attack ‘dogmatism’ inside the party, trying to use them against his rivals. Now he wanted the Chinese Communist Party to welcome critical views from outsiders in a great reckoning: ‘Those who insult the masses should be liquidated by the masses.’ Mao was using the students and workers on strike everywhere in the country as a way of putting his comrades on notice.<sup>15</sup>

There was, of course, the danger that some intellectuals would voice counter-revolutionary ideas. In 1942, instead of following the Chairman’s cues, the young volunteers had savaged the way in which the red capital was run. Mao turned against them with a vengeance, forcing them to denounce each other in endless struggle meetings. But fourteen years later the Chairman was confident that this would not happen again. Repeated campaigns of thought reform had produced a pliant intelligentsia. Only a year earlier 770,000 people had been arrested as counter-revolutionaries. Mao assured his doubtful colleagues that they had nothing to fear, as ‘right now nine and a half out of ten counter-revolutionaries have already been cut out’. This was confirmed by security boss Luo Ruiqing two weeks later. During the Hungarian uprising a few weeks earlier, he reported, some people had written anonymously to advocate the overthrow of the party. A few even wanted to get rid of the Chairman. But these were isolated voices, as all the hotbeds of counter-revolution had been successfully wiped out the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

Still, few among Mao’s colleagues relished the prospect of another Rectification Campaign, let alone one in which non-party members were allowed openly to voice their discontent. The Chairman sugared the pill by promising a ‘gentle breeze and mild rain’, as those who had strayed from the path would face ideological education rather than disciplinary punishment. Even then, senior leaders like Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen feared that the situation

might spiral out of control if people were encouraged to air their grievances openly.

Many inside the party preferred a clampdown on all popular opposition. The Chairman had to do the rounds. A few counter-revolutionaries might take centre stage, he ventured on 18 January 1957, but repression would only make matters worse. 'Don't be afraid of disturbances, the bigger and the longer, the better,' he said a few days later. 'Let the demons and ogres come out, let everybody have a good look at them . . . let those bastards come out.' They were nothing but a few poisonous weeds that appeared among fragrant flowers, and they were bound to grow every year, no matter how often they were pulled up. Then, on 27 January, he wondered: 'Even if mistakes in the party line were made and the country were to descend into chaos, even if several counties and provinces were occupied, with rebel troops all the way up to West Chang'an Avenue in Beijing, would the country collapse? Not as long as the army is reliable.'<sup>17</sup>

Mao's big day came on 27 February 1957, almost exactly one year after Khrushchev's secret speech, as he addressed an enlarged session of the Supreme State Council Conference. His speech was entitled 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People'. In Hungary, Mao explained, people had taken to the streets four months earlier, but most of them were not counter-revolutionaries. The fault lay with the party, in particular bureaucratic cadres who failed to distinguish between legitimate concerns expressed by the people and more malicious threats posed by enemies of the regime. The result was that force instead of persuasion had been used. In China too, Mao acknowledged, mistakes had occurred in the past, for instance during the political campaigns of 1951 and 1952. Many of those sentenced to labour camps, he reassured his audience, would soon benefit from an amnesty. He even expressed regret at the loss of innocent lives. He also warned that if legitimate complaints by ordinary people were badly handled, China could go the way of Hungary, as contradictions among the people would turn into contradictions between the people and the party, making the use of force necessary. The Chairman rang with sincerity, as he enumerated examples of serious errors made by the Chinese Communist Party. He was harsh with the party bureaucracy. He announced that a Rectification Campaign would soon be inaugurated to help party members improve their work. The public at large were required to help the Chinese Communist Party by airing their grievances so that social injustices could be redressed. No retaliation would be taken against those who spoke out. Again came the Chairman's dramatic call to 'let a hundred flowers bloom,

let a hundred schools contend'. Mao ended his speech by comparing himself to a star in an opera, growing too old to continue playing the leading role. He hinted that he might soon step back from the stage.<sup>18</sup>

The speech was a tremendous achievement. Mao came across as an earnest proponent of a more humane form of socialism, departing radically from past tradition. The Chairman did what he did best: rally a majority around him with promises of a better future. The meeting was attended not only by ranking party leaders and government officials, but also by members of organisations outside the party. It was taped and played to select audiences around the country. Robert Loh, who listened to the speech with 200 other delegates in Shanghai, was convinced that Mao was utterly sincere. For more than a year he had been preparing his escape to Hong Kong, but now he was dazed. 'After Mao's speech everything seemed possible. For the first time in many years, I allowed myself to hope.'<sup>19</sup>

Criticisms were slow in coming. In Beijing, the mayor Peng Zhen used his clout to control the official newspapers, including the *People's Daily*, and hold back the campaign.<sup>20</sup> Again, Mao took to the roads, travelling south to drum up support. On the one hand, he used all his charm to cultivate intellectuals and democrats, urging them to overcome their hesitations and speak out. On the other hand, he met army and party cadres, telling them that he understood why they were itching to repress the students who were on strike. 'An intellectual has a tail just like a dog,' he explained, 'if you pour some cold water on it, he will tuck it between his legs, but if you try a different attitude he will wag it high in the air, and he will look quite cocky. Just because he has read a couple of books he feels quite cocky. When working people see his cocky air, when they see that attitude, they feel a little uncomfortable.'<sup>21</sup>

Mao himself was deeply suspicious of intellectuals, but he hoped that the true followers would take up the gauntlet by speaking out against the party bureaucracy. It was a high-risk gamble. After Mao had used all his influence to have the full weight of the propaganda machine finally move behind the campaign in late April, some mild rebukes were offered at first. But in May the tone became more strident. Soon a torrent of criticism burst out.

Big posters were glued on the walls of factories, dormitories and offices, as people wrote their views on bright sheets of pink, yellow and green paper. Some wrote pithy slogans in favour of democracy and human rights, others offered lengthy essays presenting probing analyses of the role of democracy in a socialist state, the existence of glaring social disparities in a



system premised on equality or the existence of corruption inside the party ranks. Students protested against the tight control that the party maintained over culture and the arts. They railed against past injustices and the harshness of the early campaigns against counter-revolutionaries, speaking up in favour of Hu Feng. Wu Ningkun, whose house had been ransacked at Nankai University a year earlier during the hunt for Hu Feng sympathisers, called the whole campaign ‘unjustifiable and preposterous’. ‘A flagrant violation of civil rights, a premeditated official lynching’, he continued. ‘The campaign itself was a mistake, an attempt to stamp out freedom of thought and speech on the model of the Stalinist purges, which have already been exposed and denounced by Khrushchev.’ Wu confidently waited for an apology from Nankai University.<sup>22</sup>

Another target of popular ire was Moscow, as people took the party to task for slavishly emulating the Soviet Union. And everybody, it seemed, denounced poor housing and low wages, contrasting a falling standard of living to the privileges that party members enjoyed. A few penned long diatribes against the entire system, attacking the communist party and Mao Zedong in person, comparing the Chairman to the pope. Under Chiang Kai-shek, one critic wrote, there had been more freedom of speech than in New China. Even the state-controlled press carried searing indictments of the communist party. In an article entitled ‘The Party Dominates the World’, Chu Anping, who had studied at the London School of Economics under Harold Laski, took Mao Zedong to task for thinking that the world belonged to him. Chu Anping was a member of the Democratic League, as were Zhang Bojun and Luo Longji, who organised a series of meetings with democrats with no party affiliation. Many demanded that party representatives withdraw from schools, state organs and joint enterprises, while a few mocked the Chairman himself. Particularly hurtful must have been Luo Longji’s comment that Mao was an ‘amateur intellectual’ of the proletariat trying to lead professional intellectuals of the bourgeoisie.<sup>23</sup>

A few took up the farmers’ cause. Dai Huang, a committed party member and celebrated war correspondent, was taken aback by the lavish banquets and fine houses enjoyed by local cadres in the countryside, when life for most farmers was little better than before liberation. He wrote a long letter to the Chairman offering his suggestions. Fei Xiaotong, a sociologist who had made his name studying the countryside before liberation, published his account of a visit to a remote village in Jiangsu he knew from the 1930s. As soon as he had arrived, several elderly women approached him to complain about food shortages. He wrote a mildly critical report, pointing out that

it was 'simple-minded' to believe that collectivisation would solve every problem.<sup>24</sup>

Much more violent confrontations took place in closed forums attended by party officials. In Shanghai the deputy mayor welcomed 250 students who had returned from abroad after liberation. The meeting was held in the Culture Club, the art deco building that had once housed the prestigious French Club. There were graduates from some of the best universities around the world, and when asked to speak out they did so with extraordinary vehemence, blasting the lies and broken promises of the regime. They assailed the arbitrary and unjust treatment of intellectuals, and were incensed by the brutal repression that had accompanied every campaign for thought reform. But most of all they were embittered by the waste of their talents in New China. Dozens yelled simultaneously, their voices shrill with emotion. The deputy mayor soon lost his poise, and sweat started running down his face. His hair was untidy, his uniform wrinkled. 'He sat gripping the arms of his chair and his eyes darted from one shouting member of the audience to another.'

The climax of the meeting came when an engineer complained that he had given up a US\$800-a-month job in order to return and serve the motherland. He had not been allowed to do anything useful ever since, as even minor technical suggestions he made were rejected as 'bourgeois'. He had been transferred four times since coming back from abroad in 1951. Each time his salary had been readjusted downwards, and now he was paid a mere pittance. The engineer became angrier and angrier, and suddenly he took off his jacket and rushed up to the deputy mayor to shake the coat in his face. 'For six years I have not bought a single garment,' he shouted. 'For six years I have not been allowed to use my ability or my training. Because of what I have endured I've lost thirty pounds. Why? Why? How long do you expect us to put up with your stupidity, your indifference? Do you think we will all sit back quietly and let you Communists grow fat and insolent?' By now everyone in the audience was screaming wildly.<sup>25</sup>

There were small victories. In Shanghai the mayor apologised publicly to a professor who had been unjustly persecuted as an anti-party element. After the apology, other wrongly accused intellectuals were released from prison. Among them was Henry Ling, who had been the president of Shanghai University from 1945 to 1949. The experience of six years behind bars was visible in his emaciated frame, but he was delighted to be free and keen to follow the country's new path.<sup>26</sup>

Students had been striking and demonstrating sporadically since the summer of 1956, but now tens of thousands took to the streets. On 4 May 1957, some 8,000 of them converged on Beijing, marking the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, an abortive student uprising dating back to 1919. They created a 'Democracy Wall' covered with posters and slogans charging the communist party with 'suppression of freedom and democracy in all the country's educational institutions'. They called for a nationwide movement of protest, and liaised with demonstrators in other cities. In Chengdu and Qingdao students turned violent, beating up local officials and ransacking party premises. A full-scale riot broke out in Wuhan, as students from a middle school who were furious about enrolment policy stormed the party headquarters, breaking down doors and rummaging through the files. Several party officials were tied up and marched through the streets.<sup>27</sup>

Workers, too, took to the streets. Like the students, they had been active in strikes for almost a year, paralysing parts of the economy in Manchuria, Tianjin, Wuhan and Shanghai, but now matters came to a head. In Shanghai alone, major labour disturbances involving over 30,000 workers erupted at more than 580 enterprises, dwarfing anything the country had ever seen, even during the heyday of the nationalist regime in the 1930s. Minor incidents were also registered at another 700 factories, including walkouts and organised slowdowns in production.<sup>28</sup>

Some workers turned violent, tearing slogans and posters about increased production from the walls. Daring denunciations of communism appeared instead. Party officials were heckled at packed meetings, as workers made long and bitter complaints. In one incident, disgruntled workers frogmarched a local official to the Huangpu River, where they dunked his head in the water at two- to three-minute intervals. After an hour the man's face was covered with mud and blood, and he jumped into the river in an effort to swim away. A bystander who offered help was stoned by the workers. In Shanghai and elsewhere, the sight of terrified and cringing party cadres became common. 'Several times, in the streets,' reported Robert Loh, 'I saw cadres being reviled, insulted and jeered at by angry mobs.' In the words of another protagonist, Tommy Wu, the art student who had taken part in Tiger-Hunting Teams years earlier, 'it was truly a public catharsis'.<sup>29</sup>

Robert Loh himself was bemused by the whole situation and preferred to keep a low profile, despite exhortations from party officials to speak out. He escaped to Hong Kong a few weeks later. Others, too, were prudent. Yue Daiyun, the party member who had tried to protect an impoverished tailor from the execution squad during land reform, was equally guarded: 'Des-

pite my sympathy with those who were speaking out, some sense of inner caution prevented me from joining this chorus of critical voices. I felt it prudent to wait and see what would happen before commenting openly myself.' Instead she decided to participate in the campaign by joining together with other young teachers, discussing the publication of a new literary magazine.<sup>30</sup>

Around the country party officials were taken aback by the torrent of criticism unleashed by the Hundred Flowers. In Beijing the Chairman himself was in a state of shock. He had badly miscalculated. 'He stayed in bed,' his doctor Li Zhisui noted, 'depressed and apparently immobilised, sick with the cold that called me back, as the attacks grew ever more intense. He was rethinking his strategy, plotting the revenge.'<sup>31</sup>

On 15 May 1957, Mao wrote an article entitled 'Things are Changing'. It was distributed to leaders within the party. Mao told them: 'We shall let the rightists run amok for a time and let them reach their climax. The more they run amok, the better for us. Some say they are afraid of being hooked like a fish, and others say they are afraid of being lured in deep, rounded up and annihilated. Now that large numbers of fish have come to the surface of themselves, there is no need to bait the hook.' Mao was planning a counter-attack, and asked the propaganda machine to encourage more people to come out and criticise the party. He was particularly infuriated with members of the democratic parties who had proved themselves to be so unreliable. 'They are nothing but a bunch of bandits and whores,' he told his doctor.<sup>32</sup>

Behind the scenes the *People's Daily* was told to prepare to attack those the Chairman now dubbed 'rightists'. A hint came on 8 June, when an editorial by Mao accused a small number of people of attempting to assail the party and overthrow the government. On 11 June the speech he had given on 'Contradictions among the People' several months earlier was finally published, but its conciliatory tone was completely reversed. The article had been carefully rewritten to make it appear as if a trap had been laid for opponents of the regime all along, designed to 'lure the snakes of reaction out of their holes'. Everything was turned on its head, making it seem that the Chairman's encouragement of debate had been nothing but a cunning strategy to unmask all the enemies of revolution.

The period of blooming and contending was over. Mao was forced back into a temporary alliance with his opponents inside the party. Assailed from all sides, they, too, found unity behind their Chairman. Deng Xiaoping and

Peng Zhen, who had had their doubts all along, pressed for sweeping measures against all rightists. The Chairman put Deng in charge of the campaign, which targeted hundreds of thousands of individuals. On 15 May Mao had opined that the number of rightists was '1, 3, 5 or up to 10 per cent, as the case may be'. As the months went by, the number of victims gradually increased, eventually reaching over half a million people.<sup>33</sup>

The democrats whom Mao had described as 'bandits and whores' were accused of having followed an 'anti-communist, anti-people, anti-socialist bourgeois line'. Chu Anping, who had denounced the party for thinking that it dominated the world, was expelled from the party and forced to confess in one meeting after another. Others were harassed by student activists, who organised themselves spontaneously into hunting squads. On two occasions loyal students from the People's University burst into the office of Zhang Bojun, then minister of communications, while Luo Longji, soon labelled 'China's Number One Rightist', was hounded at his own home. As leaders of the Democratic League, they were accused of heading a secret 'Zhang-Luo Anti-Party Alliance' and stripped of all their positions.<sup>34</sup>

Much harsher measures were invoked against those who had joined in riots. In Wuhan, several middle-school students were executed before a crowd of 10,000 people. They, too, were accused of taking orders from the 'Zhang-Luo Anti-Party Alliance'.<sup>35</sup>

People turned against each other. Zhang Bojun and Luo Longji themselves tried to discredit each other. At one point Luo walked up to Zhang's residence and smashed his walking stick against the front door in a fit of anger. Other members of the Democratic League, including Wu Han, a historian and head of the Beijing branch of the league, did not want to lag behind, joining a chorus of accusations against both Zhang and Luo. Sometimes the politics of denunciation ripped apart entire families. Dai Huang, who had spoken out on behalf of the farmers, was taken to task by his own wife, who put up a wall poster accusing him of plotting against the party. Fei Xiaotong was forced to repudiate his report on the countryside and debase himself in a confession to the National People's Congress, accepting that he had supported the 'Zhang-Luo Anti-Party Alliance' and had 'opposed the goals of socialism'.<sup>36</sup>

Many victims initially thought that the anti-rightist campaign had nothing to do with them, since they had only answered the call of the party when airing their views. This was the case with Wu Ningkun. But as the faculty at his university spent weeks studying party directives and newspaper editorials, he was soon made to recant and confess to being a bourgeois rightist.

Colleagues and friends shunned him. He sat through meetings like a criminal awaiting his sentence, almost relieved when he was finally sent away to a labour camp in the Great Northern Wilderness.<sup>37</sup>

Even party members who were convinced that they had played it safe found themselves facing inquisitorial meetings, with rows of stern committee members subjecting their victims to endless interrogations and denunciations. This was the case with Yue Daiyun, who was put in charge of a committee tasked with denouncing five people as rightists. She spent all summer poring over the records of dozens of colleagues. Then came her turn to face accusations of rightism. 'Surely such a serious accusation could not be applied to me, I reasoned; surely the error would be quickly corrected.' She had to face her entire department, as eight to nine people stood up, one after the other, calling her a traitor and a counter-revolutionary. Some of the most vicious accusations came from a young teacher who had also been labelled a rightist, as he was eager for a chance to prove himself to the party.<sup>38</sup>

Some meetings degenerated into shouting sessions during which the victims were physically abused, with their hair grabbed and their heads pressed down on to the stage. This happened to several university professors in Beijing. In one case a participant was so furious that he shattered a teacup on the head of a victim at the Beijing Institute of Politics and Law. But intellectuals were still relatively safe from the physical violence that would erupt during the Cultural Revolution in 1966.<sup>39</sup>

Far more distressing was the arbitrary nature of the campaign. Mao had set a quota on the number of rightists and every unit in the country had to meet it. The criteria for identifying a rightist were so vague that they could potentially include almost anyone who had ever voiced an opinion. 'Opposing socialist culture', 'opposing socialist economic and political systems', 'opposing the fundamental policies of the state', 'denying the achievements of the people's democratic revolution, the socialist revolution and socialist construction' and 'opposing the leadership of the Communist Party' were all fatal mistakes.

Even with these sweeping criteria, many of the victims were merely 'accidental dissidents', to use the expression of historian Wang Ning. In some places the cadres simply ticked names off a list to fill their quota. In one theatre employees were asked to draw lots. One cashier was selected as the token rightist. Qian Xinbo, a journalist in the Central People's Broadcast Service, was approached by a cadre and asked how he felt about being named as a rightist, since several of his friends had already been denounced. 'I don't have a lot to say, let the party decide,' Qian answered meekly,

knowing that the party committee had already determined his fate. One young woman aged seventeen was packed off to the gulag for displaying ‘blind faith in foreign imperialist things’: she had praised shoe polish made in the United States.<sup>40</sup>

Jealousy and personal animosity, as always, played a role. One young man was brought down for rising too quickly in the ranks. As He Ying explained:

I became a rightist at the age of nineteen. I was the youngest editor in a literature journal in Jilin, and was well known in the literary circle of the province. I got higher pay than many of my colleagues, and I became a focus of public attention. So sometimes I was overconfident and arrogant. Many of my colleagues were jealous and wanted to see me brought down. I kept quiet about politics during the Hundred Flowers, but they convinced the party secretary to label me a rightist when the campaign started.

The story told by Yin Jie is strikingly similar: ‘When I was studying at college, I got a higher allowance than many of my fellow students . . . In addition, I did not study hard but always got good marks. Therefore I became a target of jealousy. Some people really hated me. When the campaign started, they urged the head of my department to label me as a rightist.’<sup>41</sup>

One response to false accusations was suicide. Cong Weixi witnessed how a victim jumped to his death in the middle of a denunciation meeting. ‘As the high pitch of condemnation echoed around the hall, a man sitting a couple of rows in front of me suddenly stood up. Before I realised what was happening, he quickly went for the balcony of the fourth floor and dived . . . Blood! I saw blood when I looked out. I covered my eyes as I did not have the courage to look any more.’ There were thousands of similar cases, and always suicide was interpreted as a final act of betrayal of the people. Hu Sidu, who had denounced his father Hu Shi in 1950 and striven to join the communist party, was hounded to his death after he had put forward suggestions to improve the quality of teaching in his college.<sup>42</sup>

At the other extreme were those who not only accepted the party’s judgement, but actually volunteered to go to the Great Northern Wilderness to seek introspection and self-renewal. Ding Ling, who had been the star of leftist literature in the 1930s, agreed with her husband that they should ‘renew themselves’ and carve out a new road ahead by following the values of the Chinese Communist Party. Some intellectuals had tied their own destinies so closely to the party that they simply could not envisage life without it.<sup>43</sup>



More than half a million people were labelled during the anti-rightist campaign, including intellectuals like Ding Ling who had devoted their entire careers to the party. The leadership itself had been put on notice, knowing that Mao could call upon the people to attack them. Many party leaders fell into line, no longer daring to question the Chairman's policies. The cautious views of Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun on the economy were pushed aside. Mao was ebullient. Less than a decade after liberation, he was ready to push for a new, bold experiment that would propel China to the forefront of the socialist camp. Mao called it the Great Leap Forward, as the country would accelerate the pace of collectivisation and soar into a communist utopia of plenty for all. Over the next four years, tens of millions of people would be worked, starved or beaten to death in the greatest man-made catastrophe the country had ever seen.

# Notes

For abbreviations used in the Notes, please see Bibliography, p. 399.

## 1: Siege

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- [50](#) Beijing, Dec. 1949, 1-9-47, p. 3; 10 Dec. 1953, 1-9-265, p. 7; Report on unemployment in Shanghai circulated by the central government, 30 Aug. 1950, Gansu, 91-1-97, p. 3.
- [51](#) *Neibu cankao*, 24 Aug. 1950, pp. 67–9; *Neibu cankao*, 6 June 1950, p. 23; *Neibu cankao*, 10 Aug. 1950, p. 13; Nanjing, Report on Industry, 1951, 5034-1-3, pp. 31–2; Telegram from Chen Yi to Mao Zedong, 10 May 1950, Sichuan, JX1-807, pp. 29–31.
- [52](#) ‘Shanghai Express’, *Time*, 19 June 1950.
- [53](#) Ezpeleta, *Red Shadows over Shanghai*, p. 209; Randall Gould, ‘Shanghai during the Takeover, 1949’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 277 (Sept. 1951), p. 184; Barnett, letter no. 26, ‘Communist “Administrative Take Over” of Peiping’, 28 Feb. 1949, and letter no. 36, ‘Communist Propaganda Techniques’, 12 Sept. 1949.
- [54](#) Guillain, ‘China under the Red Flag’, p. 105; Gould, ‘Shanghai during the Takeover, 1949’, p. 184; Barnett, letter no. 26, ‘Communist “Administrative Take Over” of Peiping’, 28 Feb. 1949, and letter no. 36, ‘Communist Propaganda Techniques’, 12 Sept. 1949.
- [55](#) Esther Y. Cheo, *Black Country Girl in Red China*, London: Hutchinson, 1980, p. 77; Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, pp. 41 and 44.

## 4: The Hurricane

- [1](#) ‘Coolies Rule by Terror’, *New York Times*, 11 May 1927; Chang and Halliday, *Mao*, pp. 40–1.



- [2](#) *New York Times*, 15 May 1927; Mao Zedong, 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan', March 1927, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965, vol. 1, pp. 23–4.
- [3](#) Mao, 'Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan', March 1927, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 1, pp. 23–4.
- [4](#) On Zhou Libo and his novel, see Brian J. DeMare, 'Turning Bodies and Turning Minds: Land Reform and Chinese Political Culture, 1946–1952', doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007, pp. 64–7; David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster that is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 166–7.
- [5](#) In Russian the vocabulary was *kulak* for rich peasants, *serednyak* for middle-income peasants, *bedniak* for the poor and *batrak* for labourers. The term for landlord was Mao's invention, as we see below.
- [6](#) Some remarkable insights into these conversions come from missionaries, who rarely failed to point out the parallels between Christian and communist doctrines; see for instance Robert W. Greene, *Calvary in China*, New York: Putnam, 1953, pp. 77–9.
- [7](#) All the quotations are from interviews in the documentary directed by Chen Xiaoping, *Baofeng zhōuyu* (The hurricane), China Memo Films, 2006; on the lack of revolutionary fervour in Manchuria, see Levine, *Anvil of Victory*, p. 199.
- [8](#) See, among others, Anne Osborne, 'Property, Taxes, and State Protection of Rights', in Madeleine Zelin, Jonathan Ocko and Robert Gardella (eds), *Contract and Property in Early Modern China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 120–58; Li Huaiyin, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 234–49.
- [9](#) Doak Barnett, letter no. 37, 'Communist economic policies and practices', 14 Sept. 1949; Zhang, *Xuebai xuehong*, pp. 433–6.
- [10](#) DeMare, 'Turning Bodies and Turning Minds', pp. 152–3; Philip C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, p. 71; S. T. Tung, 'Land Reform, Red Style', *Freeman*, 25 Aug. 1952, quoted in Richard J. Walker, *China under Communism: The First Five Years*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, p. 131.
- [11](#) John L. Buck, *Land Utilization in China*, Nanjing: University of Nanking, 1937; Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 160.
- [12](#) Sun Nainai, Xushui, interviewed in 2006; the practice of burying people alive in the region was also noted by Raymond J. de Jaegher, *The Enemy Within: An Eyewitness Account of the Communist Conquest of China*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952, pp. 112–14; Liu Shaoqi reprimanded his colleagues for the practice in 1947, as we see below on p. 73.
- [13](#) Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World*, New York: Harper, 1949, p. 33.
- [14](#) John Byron and Robert Pack, *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng, the Evil Genius behind Mao and his Legacy of Terror in People's China*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, pp. 125–6; Roger Faligot and Rémi Kauffer, *The Chinese Secret Service*, New York: Morrow, 1989, pp. 103–4 and 115–18.
- [15](#) Zhang Yongdong, *Yijiusijiu nianhou Zhongguo nongcun zhidu biange shi* (A history of changes in the Chinese countryside after 1949), Taipei: Ziyou wenhua chubanshe, 2008, pp. 23–4; Luo Pinghan, *Tudi gaige yundong shi* (A history of the campaign for land reform), Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2005, pp. 182–4 and 205; on land reform as a political device to overthrow traditional elites one should also read the many essays of Qin Hui, for instance Bi-an Wu (Qin Hui), 'Gongshe zhi mi: Nongye jituanhua de zai renshi' (The myth of the commune: Revisiting the collectivisation of agriculture), *Ershiye shiji*, no. 48 (Aug. 1998), pp. 22–36, and Qin Hui, *Nongmin Zhongguo: Lishi fansi yu xianshi xuanze* (Peasant China: Historical reflections and realistic choices), Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2003.

- 16 Report by Liu Shaohqi at the National Conference on Land Reform, Aug. 1947, Hebei, 572-1-35, two versions of the same speech in documents 1 and 3, pp. 33-4; this report is also quoted in a much more detailed context in a chapter on land reform by Yang Kuisong, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianguo shi yanjiu* (Studies on the history of the founding of the People's Republic of China), Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2009, vol. 1, p. 55.
- 17 Zhang Mingyuan, 'Wo de huiyi' (My recollections), p. 259, quoted in Zhang Ming, 'Huabei diqu tudi gaige yundong de zhengzhi yunzuo (1946-1949)' (Land reform in North China, 1946-1949), *Ershiyei shiji*, no. 82 (April 2003), pp. 32-41; on Shandong, see Zhang Xueqi-ang, *Xiangcun bianqian yu nongmin jiyi: Shandong laoqu Junan xian tudi gaige yanjiu* (Village change and peasant memory: Studies on land reform in Junan county, Shandong), Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2006.
- 18 Liu Tong, *Zhongyuan jiefang zhanzheng jishi* (A historical record of the civil war in the central plains), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2003, pp. 317-18, quoted in Luo, *Tudi gaige yundong shi*, p. 273.
- 19 *Renmin ribao*, 30 March 1951, p. 2, quoted in DeMare, 'Turning Bodies and Turning Minds', p. 5.
- 20 Brian Crozier, *The Man who Lost China: The First Full Biography of Chiang Kai-shek*, New York: Scribner, 1976, p. 352.
- 21 Bo, *Ruogan zhongda shijian yu juece de huigu*, vol. 1, pp. 115-28.
- 22 Mao Zedong quoted in a speech by Deng Zihui on the spirit of the Third Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee of the CPC, 10 July 1950, Hubei, SZ1-2-15, p. 29.
- 23 On Guangdong see Shaanxi, 9 Sept. 1950, 123-1-83, p. 164; on the south-west see *Neibu cankao*, 27 July 1950, pp. 93-4; the numbers for tax collection are in *Neibu cankao*, 14 Sept. 1950, p. 67.
- 24 Reports on grain requisitions, 3 and 8 Feb., 13 and 19 March and 3 May 1950, Hubei, SZ1-2-32, pp. 33, 36, 66-7, 69-70, 72-4 and 83-4; Report on land reform by the South China Bureau, 13 Dec. 1951, Gansu, 91-18-532, pp. 22-5; on Guizhou, see the pioneering article by Wang Haiguang, 'Zhengliang, minbian yu "feiluan"' (Grain procurements, popular revolts and 'bandit disorder'), *Zhongguo dangdaishi yanjiu*, no. 1 (Aug. 2011), pp. 229-66.
- 25 *Neibu cankao*, 2 Sept. 1950, pp. 7-8.
- 26 Shaanxi, 1 Feb. 1951, 123-1-151, pp. 33-8.
- 27 Report from the East China Bureau, 5 May 1950, Shaanxi, 123-1-83, pp. 1-7.
- 28 In the case of Hubei, the provincial party committee expressed the need to carry out land reform as a specific strategy to cope with popular rebellion in a series of documents in Hubei, 3 and 8 Feb., 13 and 19 March and 3 May 1950, SZ1-2-32, pp. 33, 36, 66-7, 69-70, 72-4 and 83-4.
- 29 Sichuan, 12 Sept. 1951, JX1-177, p. 18; Report on land reform from the Teng County Party Committee, 27 Jan. and 2 Feb. 1951, Shandong, A1-2-68, pp. 61 and 64-5.
- 30 Report from Guizhou, 12 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-839, pp. 127-8.
- 31 *Neibu cankao*, 2 June 1950, p. 10.
- 32 Cheo, *Black Country Girl in Red China*, pp. 161-2; Old Sun, born 1918, Xushui, Henan, interviewed in 2006.
- 33 Reports on Yunyang, 12 and 30 May and 10 June 1951, Hubei, SZ1-5-75, pp. 37-8, 41-4, 58-60; *Neibu cankao*, 24 Aug. 1950, pp. 65-6; *Neibu cankao*, 9 Sept. 1950, pp. 46-7; Report on land reform by the South China Bureau, 13 Dec. 1951, Gansu, 91-18-532, pp. 22-5.
- 34 Sichuan, 9 Dec. 1951, JX1-168, p. 72; 4 Nov. 1951, JX1-168, pp. 16-17; 5 March 1951, JX1-837, pp. 124-5.
- 35 Instructions from Li Jingquan, 21 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-842, p. 3.
- 36 Report from Luotian, 1 Aug. 1951, Hubei, SZ1-2-60, pp. 79-85.
- 37 Yang Li, *Dai ci de hong meigui: Gudacun chenyan lu* (Thorny rose: The tragedy of Gudacun), Guangzhou: Zhonggong Guangdong shengwei dangshi yanjiushi, 1997, pp. 100-16; Zheng Xiaofeng and Shu Ling, *Tao Zhu zhuan* (A biography of Tao Zhu), Beijing: Zhonggong

dangshi chubanshe, 2008, pp. 230–1; Yang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianguo shi yanjiu*, vol. 1, p. 150; Yue Sai, ‘Wo qinxian qinjian de Zhonggong tugai zhenfan sharen shishi’ (I personally witnessed killings by the communist party during land reform and the campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries), *Kaifang*, March 1999; on overseas Chinese in Guangdong see Glen D. Peterson, ‘Socialist China and the *Huaqiao*: The Transition to Socialism in the Overseas Chinese Areas of Rural Guangdong, 1949–1956’, *Modern China*, 14, no. 3 (July 1988), pp. 309–35.

- 38 Shandong, October 1948, G26-1-37, doc. 2, pp. 49–50; Financial report on Shandong by Kang Sheng, 1 Jan. and 4 Sept. 1949, Shandong, A1-2-19, pp. 68–9 and 119; Report on the Jiluyu region, 1 Feb. 1949, Shandong, G52-1-194, doc. 5, p. 7; on the impoverishment following land distribution, see also Gao Wangling and Liu Yang, ‘Tugai de jiduanhua’ (The radicalization of the land reform movement), *Ershiyi shiji*, no. 111 (Feb. 2009), pp. 36–47.
- 39 Report from the South-west Bureau, 27 June 1951, Sichuan, JX1-809, pp. 42–4.
- 40 Correspondence between the Ministry of Culture and the Provincial Bureau for Cultural Affairs, Shandong, 19 Sept. 1951, A27-1-230, pp. 69–72.
- 41 Frederick C. Teiwes, ‘The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime, 1949–57’, in Roderick MacFarquhar (ed.), *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 36; see also David Shambaugh, ‘The Foundations of Communist Rule in China: The Coercive Dimension’, in William C. Kirby (ed.), *The People’s Republic of China at 60: An International Assessment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011, pp. 21–3.

## 5: The Great Terror

- 1 Mao Zedong quoted in a speech by Deng Zihui on the spirit of the Third Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee of the CPC, 10 July 1950, Hubei, SZ1-2-15, pp. 19–47; needless to say, these uncensored quotations are substantially different from the published speech in Mao’s collected writings.
- 2 Mao Zedong, ‘Don’t Hit Out in All Directions’, 6 June 1950, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 5, p. 34.
- 3 Report from the South China Bureau, 21 Dec. 1950, Guangdong, 204-1-34, p. 50; Report on Guangxi, March 1951, Guangdong, 204-1-34, pp. 16–24; the quotation is from Mao Zedong, ‘A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire’, 5 Jan. 1930, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 1, p. 124.
- 4 Instructions from Mao Zedong, 3 Jan. 1951, Sichuan, JX1-836, p. 10; Report on Guangxi from inspection team, March 1951, Guangdong, 204-1-34, pp. 16–24 and 69–70; the telegram Tao wired to Mao is quoted in Yang, *Dai ci de hong meigui*, p. 111; while this telegram may be apocryphal, the figure of 430,000 pacified and 40,000 killed appears in Report from Guangxi Provincial Party Committee, 7 July 1951, Sichuan, JX1-836, pp. 78–82.
- 5 Report by Luo Ruiqing, 23 Aug. 1952, Shaanxi, 123-25-2, p. 357.
- 6 The quotation comes from Zhang Guotao, an ex-Politburo member and military leader who fell foul of Mao and was interviewed in Hong Kong in ‘High Tide of Terror’, *Time*, 5 March 1956; on Dzerzhinsky, see Faligot and Kauffer, *The Chinese Secret Service*, p. 345.
- 7 Hubei, 21 Nov. 1950, SZ1-2-32, pp. 7–13; Report on Labour Camps, 8 June 1951, and Report from Li Xiannian on the Campaign against Counter-Revolutionaries, 1951, Hubei, SZ1-2-60, pp. 51 and 115; Report by Luo Ruiqing, 23 Aug. 1952, Shaanxi, 123-25-2, p. 357.
- 8 Orders from Ye Jianying to Tao Zhu and Chen Manyuan, 10 May 1951, Guangdong, 204-1-34, pp. 1–5 (Ye Jianying was Tao Zhu’s immediate superior as leader of the Central and South China Bureau); Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, Rao Shushi, Deng Zihui, Ye Jianying, Xi Zhongxun and Gao Gang, 20 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 75–7.

- [9](#) Mao's Comments on Report from Henan, 11 March 1951, Sichuan, JX1-836, p. 17; Mao's instructions to Luo Ruiqing, 30 Jan. 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834,p. 9; see also Comments by Mao, 20 Jan. 1951, Shaanxi, 123-25-2, p. 40.
- [10](#) Orders by Mao Zedong transmitted to Li Jingquan, 18 Feb. 1951, Sichuan, JX1-807, pp. 89–91; this form of government in Nazi Germany has been called 'working towards the Führer' by Ian Kershaw, and Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals have proposed calling it 'working towards the Chairman' in the case of the Cultural Revolution, Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.
- [11](#) Order from Mao, 14 April 1951, Shandong, A1-5-29, p. 124; this comment is different from the version printed in Mao Zedong, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's manuscripts since the founding of the People's Republic), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987–96, vol. 2, pp. 215–16, as is the case in many other of Mao's directives used in this chapter; the central directive dated 21 May 1951 is in Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 2, p. 319.
- [12](#) Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, Rao Shushi, Deng Zihui, Ye Jianying, Xi Zhongxun and Gao Gang, 20 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 75–7; the exact formulation is three out of five military regions that encompassed several provinces each; in Guizhou the number given was 29,000; see Investigation Report on Guizhou, 7 July 1951, Sichuan, JX1-839,pp. 250–2.
- [13](#) Minutes of the Third National Conference on Public Security, 16 and 22 May 1951, Shandong, A1-4-9, p. 38; see also Shandong, A51-1-28,p. 215; Luo Ruiqing's talk at the Government Administration Council,3 Aug. 1951, Shandong, A51-1-28, p. 212.
- [14](#) Sichuan, 20 March 1953, JK1-729, p. 29; this document is dated 1953, when the judicial authorities looked into some of the most egregious abuses that took place during the terror in 1951.
- [15](#) Report from Qian Ying, secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, to Zhu De, 25 March 1953, Sichuan, JK1-730, p. 35.
- [16](#) Report on infringements against minority policy, Sichuan, 24 July 1952, JX1-880, pp. 82–3.
- [17](#) Statistics and detailed examples about false arrests in Guizhou can be found in a report circulated in Sichuan, 18 June 1951, JX1-839,pp. 227–9.
- [18](#) Sichuan, 25 April 1951, JX1-839, pp. 159–60; Report by Deng Xiaoping to Mao Zedong, 13 March 1951, Shandong, A1-5-20, pp. 16–19.
- [19](#) Report from Yunnan, 29 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-837, p. 74.
- [20](#) Hu Yaobang, Report on West Sichuan, 29 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-837, p. 190.
- [21](#) Sichuan, 28 May 1951, JX1-837, pp. 105–8; Report by Luo Zhimin, Sichuan, July 1951, JX1-37, pp. 1–2.
- [22](#) Comments by Mao, 16 May 1951, Shandong, A1-5-20, p. 134; see also Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 2, p. 306.
- [23](#) Report from Fuling, 5 April and 28 May 1951, Sichuan, JX1-837, pp. 141–2 and 147–8; Report on capital executions in Wenjiang, 28 June 1951, Sichuan, JX1-342, p. 115; Report from the East China Bureau, including details on west Sichuan, 12 May 1951, Shandong, A1-5-29,p. 189; on mass killings in west Sichuan, including Dayi, Mianyang and other counties, see also Sichuan, JX1-342, 7 June 1951, p. 32.
- [24](#) Guo Ya, 'Kaifeng de zhenya' (The campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries in Kaifeng), in Jiao Guobiao, *Hei wulei jiyi* (Memories from the five black categories), 2010, vol. 8, Beijing: Jiao Guobiao, pp. 57–8.
- [25](#) Greene, *Calvary in China*, p. 96.
- [26](#) Zhang Yingrong interviewed by Liao Yiwu, *God is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, New York: HarperCollins, 2011, pp. 121–2; Zhang was classified as a landlord because his eldest brother had been a county chief under the nationalist government.

- [27](#) Instructions from the Provincial Party Committee, 3 April 1951, Hebei, 855-1-137, p. 23; Zhang Mao'en interviewed by Liao Yiwu, *God is Red*, p. 136.
- [28](#) Instructions from the Provincial Party Committee, 3 April 1951, Hebei, 855-1-137, p. 23; Sichuan, 25 Feb. 1953, JK1-745, p. 67.
- [29](#) Report on the killing of Huang Zuyan, 12 April 1951, Comments by Mao Zedong, Shandong, 19 April 1951, A1-5-20, pp. 38–43; a witness at the time also sees this incident as critical in the triggering of 'revenge killings' by Mao: see Li Changyu, 'Mao's "Killing Quotas"', *China Rights Forum*, no. 4 (2005), pp. 41–4.
- [30](#) Comments by Mao, 18 March 1951, Shandong, A1-5-20, pp. 63–4; also in Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 2, pp. 168–9.
- [31](#) Reports from Shandong with Comments by Mao, 3, 4 and 7 April 1951, Shandong, A1-4-14, pp. 30, 43 and 50; the reference to 'faint-hearted comrades' is not included in the *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 2, pp. 225–6; Report from Jinan to the Centre, 13 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-835, pp. 33–4.
- [32](#) Report on Preparations for the Raid from the East China Bureau to the Centre, 27 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 83–4; Robert Loh, *Escape from Red China*, London: Michael Joseph, 1962, pp. 65–6.
- [33](#) Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 65–6 and 68.
- [34](#) Noel Barber, *The Fall of Shanghai*, New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979, p. 223.
- [35](#) 'Speech by Mayor Peng Zhen', *Renmin ribao*, 22 June 1951, p. 1; the original is much longer and is abbreviated here.
- [36](#) Cheo, *Black Country Girl in Red China*, p. 60.
- [37](#) Chow Ching-wen, *Ten Years of Storm: The True Story of the Communist Regime in China*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960, p. 110; Instructions from the Provincial Party Committee, 3 April 1951, Hebei, 855-1-137, p. 23.
- [38](#) Instructions from Mao, 30 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 92–3; see also Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 2, pp. 267–8.
- [39](#) Luo Ruiqing's report to Mao Zedong, 20 March 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 50–2.
- [40](#) Kou Qingyan, Report on Border Defence and the Campaign against Counter-Revolutionaries, 28 Oct. 1951, Guangdong, 204-1-27, pp. 152–5; Report by Wang Shoudao to the Centre, 26 Dec. 1952, Shandong, A1-5-85, pp. 120–5.
- [41](#) Report by Luo Ruiqing, 2 Jan. 1953, Shandong, A1-5-85, pp. 49 and 62; see also Report by Luo Ruiqing, 22 April 1953, Shandong, A1-5-85, p. 43.
- [42](#) Report by Luo Ruiqing, 23 Aug. 1952, Shaanxi, 123-25-2, p. 357.
- [43](#) Report from Fuling, 5 April and 28 May 1951, Sichuan, JX1-837, pp. 141–2 and 147–8; Report on capital executions in Wenjiang, 28 June 1951, Sichuan, JX1-342, pp. 113–14; General report by Deng Xiaoping, 30 Nov. 1951, Sichuan, JX1-809, p. 32.
- [44](#) Report from the Eastern China region, Shandong, 12 May 1951, A1-5-29, pp. 183–4.
- [45](#) Report on counter-revolutionaries, Hebei, 1962, 884-1-223, p. 149.
- [46](#) Minutes of the Third National Conference on Public Security, 16 and 22 May 1951, Shandong, A1-4-9, p. 14.
- [47](#) Liu Shaoqi, Report at the Fourth Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee, 6 Feb. 1954, Guangdong, 204-1-203, pp. 3–8; Mao Zedong, 'On the Ten Great Relationships', 25 April 1956, circulated on 16 May 1956, Shandong, A1-2-387, pp. 2–17; this figure was probably based on the statistics gathered by Xu Zirong, the deputy minister for public security, and submitted in a report dated 14 January 1954. The report is referred to in Yang Kuisong's article entitled 'Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries', *China Quarterly*, no. 193 (March 2008), pp. 102–21.
- [48](#) Georg Palocz-Horvath, *Der Herr der blauen Ameisen: Mao Tse-tung*, Frankfurt am Main: Scheffler, 1962, p. 249.
- [49](#) On the outcasts and their social function see Yang Su, *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 114–20.

- [50](#) Loh, *Escape from Red China*, p. 70.
- [51](#) Li, 'Mao's "Killing Quotas"', p. 41.
- [52](#) Cheo, *Black Country Girl in Red China*, p. 73.

## 6: The Bamboo Curtain

- [1](#) Peter Lum, *Peking, 1950–1953*, London: Hale, 1958, p. 84; Peter Lum was the pen name of Eleanor Peter Crowe, the wife of Colin Crowe and sister of Catherine Lum, Antonio Riva's wife; 'Old Hands, Beware!', *Time*, 27 Aug. 1951; see also L. H. Lamb, British Embassy Report, 29 Aug. 1951, PRO, FO371-92332, p. 155.
- [2](#) 'Old Hands, Beware!', *Time*, 27 Aug. 1951; the drawing and other evidence of the affair appear in PRO, FO371-92333, pp. 2–25.
- [3](#) Lum, *Peking, 1950–1953*, pp. 90–2.
- [4](#) Hao Yen-p'ing, *The Commercial Revolution in Nineteenth-Century China: The Rise of Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; Philip Richardson, *Economic Change in China, c. 1800–1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 42.
- [5](#) On the foreign community in the republican era, see Frank Dikötter, *China before Mao: The Age of Openness*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; a wonderful book on the expatriate communities is Frances Wood, *No Dogs and Not Many Chinese: Treaty Port Life in China, 1843–1943*, London: John Murray, 1998; see also Nicholas R. Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire: Westerners in Shanghai and the Chinese Revolution of the 1920s*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991; John K. Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir*, New York: Harper & Row, 1982, p. 51.
- [6](#) See the seminal work of Albert Feuerwerker, *The Foreign Establishment in China in the Early Twentieth Century*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976, pp. 106–7.
- [7](#) Elden B. Erickson interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 25 June 1992, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project; 'Angus Ward Summarizes Mukden Experiences', *Department of State Bulletin*, 21, no. 547 (26 Dec. 1949), p. 955, quoted in Herbert W. Briggs, 'American Consular Rights in Communist China', *American Journal of International Law*, 44, no. 2 (April 1950), p. 243; see also, among others, Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 33–4.
- [8](#) Mao Zedong, 'Farewell, John Leighton Stuart', 18 Aug. 1949, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 4, p. 433.
- [9](#) David Middleditch interviewed by Beverley Hooper, 21 Aug. 1971, quoted in Beverley Hooper, *China Stands Up: Ending the Western Presence, 1948–1950*, London: Routledge, 1987, p. 47; on the emergency evacuation see also Hooper, *China Stands Up*, p. 48.
- [10](#) Ezpeleta, *Red Shadows over Shanghai*, p. 173; Eleanor Beck, 'My Life in China from 2 January 1946 to 25 September 1949', unpublished manuscript quoted in Hooper, *China Stands Up*, pp. 47–9.
- [11](#) Hooper, *China Stands Up*, p. 50.
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## 8: The Purge

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## 9: Thought Reform

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## 10: The Road to Serfdom

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- [33](#) Guangdong, 1954, 204-1-122, pp. 19–21 and 31–3; Guangdong, Dec. 1953, 204-1-222, pp. 69 and 113; An Pingsheng, Report on Procurements in East Guangdong, 8 Jan. 1954, 204-1-337, pp. 89–91; Report by the Jiangxi Provincial Party Committee, 4 March 1954, Shaanxi, 123-1-1203, pp. 3–10.
- [34](#) Joseph Needham and Francesca Bray, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 6: *Biology and Biological Technology*, part 2: *Agriculture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 401.
- [35](#) Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China*, p. 75.

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- 37 Report from the Bureau for Grain, 4 June 1963, Shandong, A131-1-70; Hebei, 10 Oct. 1956, 855-3-889, p. 36; Shaanxi, 1965, 231-1-703, entire table; Urgent Telegram to the Centre, 17 Feb. 1955, Jilin, 1-1(11)-81, pp. 1–3.
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- 41 Background information in Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, ‘The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s *Hukou* System’, *China Quarterly*, no. 139 (Sept. 1994), pp. 644–68; Shandong, 12 April 1954, A1-2-236, p. 14; Ministry of Labour, Report on Migration from the Countryside, 4 Dec. 1953, Gansu, 91-2-201, pp. 1–6; *Neibu cankao*, 5 Aug. 1954, pp. 76–7.
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## 11: High Tide

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- 4 Gao, *Hong taiyang*, pp. 491–5.
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- 10 For the abandonment of the New Democracy, see Lin Yunhui, *Xiang shehuizhuyi guodu, 1953–55* (The transition to socialism, 1953–55), Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2009.
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- [13](#) Wingrove, 'Gao Gang and the Moscow Connection', pp. 95–7.
- [14](#) Stalin's death is described in Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, New York: Knopf, 2004, p. 649; on Gao's visit to Moscow see Dai and Zhao, *Gao Gang zhuan*, p. 310; Andrei Ledovsky spoke to Gao Gang on the plane back to Beijing, and is quoted in Wingrove, 'Gao Gang and the Moscow Connection', p. 100.
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- [17](#) Gao's death as well as security arrangements in the capital are described by his secretary in Zhao and Zhang, *Gao Gang zai Beijing*, pp. 201 and 210; the tea boy appears in Chang and Halliday, *Mao*, p. 388.
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- [19](#) Mao Zedong, On the Cooperative Transformation of Agriculture, Shandong, 31 July 1955, A1-2-292, pp. 19–42; a translated version, from which the quotation is taken, appears in Kau and Leung, *The Writings of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976*, vol. 1, 603.
- [20](#) Liu Jianhui and Wang Hongxu, 'The Origins of the General Line for the Transition Period and of the Acceleration of the Chinese Socialist Transformation in Summer 1955', *China Quarterly*, no. 187 (Sept. 2006), pp. 729–30.
- [21](#) Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji (eds), *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976* (A biography of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003, p. 377; Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 5, p. 209.
- [22](#) Two examples of a provincial party committee that later confessed to ignoring the meeting of 17 May are Jilin and Shandong: see its self-criticism in Jilin, August 1955, 1-7(4)-1, pp. 72–9, and Report from the Provincial Party Committee, 17 Aug. 1955, Shandong, A1-1-188, pp. 204–6; the meeting on 11 July is detailed in Pang and Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976*, pp. 380–1; see also Liu and Wang, 'The Origins of the General Line', p. 730.
- [23](#) Mao Zedong, On the Cooperative Transformation of Agriculture, Shandong, 31 July 1955, A1-2-292, pp. 19–42.
- [24](#) Meeting with Provincial and Municipal Party Secretaries, Shandong, 15 Aug. 1955, A1-2-292, pp. 11–17; Peng Yihu wrote a letter critical of the grain monopoly to the Central Committee.
- [25](#) These statistics, as well as the overall development of the co-operatives during the Socialist High Tide, have been provided many times, and I take them from Kenneth R. Walker, 'Collectivisation in Retrospect: The "Socialist High Tide" of Autumn 1955–Spring 1956', *China Quarterly*, no. 26 (June 1966), pp. 1–43; the ban on the blind was passed in Hailong county; see Jilin, 4 Feb. 1956, 2-12-37, pp. 87–90.
- [26](#) Instructions from the Centre, 15 March 1956, Guangdong, 217-1-8, p. 2.
- [27](#) Li Choh-ming, 'Economic Development', *China Quarterly*, no. 1 (March 1960), p. 42.
- [28](#) Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 149–50; Guo Dihuo, 'Wo he Pan Hannian tongzhi de jiaowang', *Shanghai wenshi ziliao xuanji*, vol. 43 (1983), pp. 26–8, quoted in Bergère, 'Les Capitalistes shanghaiens et la période de transition entre le régime Guomindang et le communisme (1948–1952)', p. 29; the reasons behind the arrest of Pan and Yang, who were rehabilitated decades later, are complex, and the most up-to-date guide is Xiaohong Xiao-Planes, 'The Pan Hannian Affair and Power Struggles at the Top of the CCP (1953–1955)', *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (Autumn 2010), pp. 116–27.
- [29](#) Report from the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee, 27 Sept. 1955, Hebei, 855-3-617, pp. 24–31.
- [30](#) Pang and Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976*, pp. 448–9.
- [31](#) Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 179–80.
- [32](#) *Ibid.*, p. 188.



## 12: The Gulag

- 1 On the early period, the work of Patricia Griffin remains the best on the subject; see Patricia E. Griffin, *The Chinese Communist Treatment of Counterrevolutionaries, 1924–1949*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; on Shandong, see Frank Dikötter, 'The Emergence of Labour Camps in Shandong Province, 1942–1950', *China Quarterly*, no. 175 (Sept. 2003), pp. 803–17; for a more general history of the Chinese gulag, nothing to date surpasses Jean-Luc Domenach, *L'Archipel oublié*, Paris: Fayard, 1992; in English, the work of Harry Wu is essential: Harry Hongda Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992; see also Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- 2 Dikötter, *Crime, Punishment and the Prison in Modern China*.
- 3 Frank Dikötter, 'Crime and Punishment in Post-Liberation China: The Prisoners of a Beijing Gaol in the 1950s', *China Quarterly*, no. 149 (March 1997), pp. 147–59; the terms for these political crimes were *juntong*, *zhongtong*, *Guomindang*, *hanjian* and *pandang*.
- 4 The figure of over 1 million appears in Report from the Third Conference on Public Security, 1 June 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, p. 101; on Hunan see Report on Labour Camps, 8 June 1951 and Report from Li Xiannian on the Campaign against Counter-Revolutionaries, 1951, Hubei, SZ1-2-60, pp. 51, 79–85 and 115; Report from the Guangxi Provincial Party Committee, 7 July 1951, Sichuan, JX1-836, pp. 78–82, also Hebei, 7 July 1951, 684-1-59, pp. 12–15.
- 5 Sichuan, 1951, JX1-839, pp. 486–7; Inspection Report on the Chongqing County Prison, 24 July 1951, Sichuan, JX1-342, pp. 33–4; see also Public Security Bureau Report on Prisons in Western Sichuan, 1951, Sichuan, JX1-342, pp. 92–3; on death rates in south-west China see Sichuan, 5 Sept. 1951, JX1-839, pp. 386–7; Hebei, 31 May 1951, 855-1-137, p. 47; Quentin K. Y. Huang, *Now I Can Tell: The Story of a Christian Bishop under Communist Persecution*, New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1954, p. 22.
- 6 Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, Rao Shushi, Deng Zihui, Ye Jianying, Xi Zhongxun and Gao Gang, 20 April 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 75–7.
- 7 The decision to put 300,000 prisoners to work is in Minutes of the Third National Conference on Public Security, Shandong, 16 and 22 May 1951, A1-4-9, pp. 14, 38 and 43; Report by Luo Ruiqing, Shandong, 4 June 1951, A1-5-20, pp. 149–51.
- 8 Report from Luo Ruiqing to Mao Zedong, 5 Dec. 1951, Sichuan, JX1-834, pp. 240–5; the tin mines at Lianxian are mentioned in Report from Qian Ying, secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, to Zhu De, 25 March 1953, Sichuan, JK1-730, p. 36.
- 9 Yearly report from the Ministry of Public Security, 28 April 1956, Shandong, A1-1-233, pp. 57–60; Sichuan, 21 June 1953, JK1-13, pp. 40–1; the experts in the gulag are mentioned in Order from Deng Xiaoping, 24 July and 13 Aug. 1956, Shandong, A1-1-233, pp. 74–5.
- 10 Duan, *Zhanfan zishu*; Report from the Inspectorate, 14 March 1953, Hebei, 855-2-298, pp. 16–27; Report from North-west China to the Centre, 21 March 1953, Hebei, 855-2-298, p. 30.
- 11 Sichuan, 20 March 1953, JK1-729, p. 29; Report on the Three-Anti Campaign in Judicial System, 16 March 1953, Beijing, 2-5-18, p. 6; the electric device is described in Huang, *Now I Can Tell*, pp. 22–7 and 89.
- 12 The comment about the Auschwitz of the mind is from Harry Wu, who is quoted alongside Robert Ford and Wang Tsunming in Kate Saunders, *Eighteen Layers of Hell: Stories from the Chinese Gulag*, London: Cassell Wellington House, 1996, p. 73; a good description of cellmates being forced to beat each other appears in Harold W. Rigney, *Four Years in a Red*

*Hell: The Story of Father Rigney*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1956, p. 156; see also Huang, *Now I Can Tell*, pp. 106–10; Simon Leys commented a long time ago on the two alternatives facing anyone caught up in the gulag, one being suicide, the other a complete renunciation of one's former self: see Simon Leys, *Broken Images: Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1980, p. 146.

- 13 Report on Re-education through Labour Camps, 10 Jan. 1956, Shandong, A1-1-233, pp. 33–7; the figure of 300,000 comes from the Third National Conference of the Ministry of Public Security on Reform through Labour, 27 Oct. 1955, Shandong, A1-1-233, p. 39.
- 14 Report on Western Sichuan to the Fourth National Conference on Public Security, 19 July 1952, Sichuan, JX1-843, pp. 53–5; Report by Changwei County Party Committee, 22 May and 1 June 1953, Shandong, A1-5-85, pp. 86 and 992–4; Report by Luo Ruiqing, 6 Feb. 1953, Shandong, A1-5-85, pp. 20–3.
- 15 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, p. 69.
- 16 Report by Luo Ruiqing, 6 Feb. 1953, Shandong, A1-5-85, pp. 20–3.
- 17 *Neibu cankao*, 27 May 1950, pp. 80–1.
- 18 Report on the Huai River, 14 Oct. 1950, Nanjing, 4003-3-84, pp. 143–4.
- 19 *Neibu cankao*, 24 March 1951.
- 20 *Neibu cankao*, 23 March 1953, pp. 548–55.
- 21 Report on the Jingzhou region, 15 Dec. 1951, Hubei, SZ37-1-63, p. 3; Shaanxi, 27 Dec. 1953, 123-1-490, n.p., first document in folder.
- 22 Beijing, 30 March 1956, 2-8-58, p. 17.
- 23 Beijing, 1 Dec. 1956, 2-8-58, p. 34; Report by Xie Juezai on Migration, 27 July 1956, Beijing, 2-8-47, p. 4; Letters from the Public, 8 Dec. 1956, Beijing, 2-8-247, pp. 113–14.
- 24 Tyler, *Wild West China*, pp. 192–5.

## 13: Behind the Scenes

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- 2 Ibid., pp. 37–48.
- 3 Cameron, *Mandarin Red*, pp. 33–5; see also Hung Chang-tai, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 92–108; letter from Cai Shuli, 24 April 1957, Beijing, 2-9-230, p. 58; Liang Jun, one of China's first female tractor drivers, was eulogised in posters, novels and films after 1953 (later she appeared on 1-yuan banknotes).
- 4 Some wonderful pages on this sense of idealism appear in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 67–72.
- 5 Kinmond, *No Dogs in China*, pp. 27 and 171; see also the chapter on China in the excellent book by Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, pp. 278–346.
- 6 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 161–2.
- 7 Some of the best pages on the tourist circuit are in Chu, *The Inside Story of Communist China*, pp. 256–61; see also Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*.
- 8 Peter Schmid, *The New Face of China*, London: Harrap, 1958, p. 52; Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, p. 105; on Beijing, see also Wang Jun, *Beijing Record: A Physical and Political History of Planning Modern Beijing*, London: World Scientific, 2011; Hung, *Mao's New World*, pp. 25–50.
- 9 J. M. Addis and Douglas Hurd, 'A Visit to South-West China' and 'A Visit to North-West China', 25 Oct. to 21 Nov. 1955, FO371-115169, pp. 4, 16 and 29; Kinmond, *No Dogs in China*, p. 113.

- [10](#) Sun Jingwen, Report at the First National Conference on City Building, 14 June 1954, Shandong, A107-2-307, pp. 49–67; Report by Gao Gang on capital construction at the Second National Conference on Financial and Economic Work, 29 June 1953, Shandong, A1-2-144, pp. 53–9.
- [11](#) Kinmond, *No Dogs in China*, p. 26.
- [12](#) Sun Jingwen, Report at the First National Conference on City Building, 14 June 1954, Shandong, A107-2-309, pp. 49–67, quotation on p. 55; see also the report on urban planning by the Soviet expert Balakin, 15 June 1954, Shandong, A107-2-309, pp. 68–89; besides these official reports, complaints about housing figure prominently in letters from the public written to the People’s Congress, for instance in Beijing, 27 Dec. 1956, 2-8-247, pp. 125–6 and 181; Instructions by Liu Shaoqi to the Ministry of Textile Industry, 22 Feb. 1956, Shandong, A1-2-387, p. 72; the Dongjiao Railway Station is mentioned in Beijing, 10 Nov. 1956, 2-8-247, p. 52.
- [13](#) Li Fuchun, Report at the First National Design Conference, 24 Sept. 1957, Shandong, A107-1-67, pp. 138–47.
- [14](#) Report from Anshan Party Committee, 22 March 1956, Shandong, A1-2-393, pp. 42–3.
- [15](#) Report from the Workers’ Union, 25 June 1956, Nanjing, 4003-1-107, pp. 370–6.
- [16](#) Report on labour conditions circulated by the Centre, 22 March 1956, Nanjing, 4003-1-107, pp. 364–5.
- [17](#) Hubei, May 13 Aug. 1956, SZ29-1-13, pp. 2–3; Hubei, May 1956, SZ29-1-144, pp. 14–35; Report from the Federation of Trade Unions to the Centre, 29 May 1956, Shandong, A1-2-393, pp. 54–8; also in Nanjing, 4003-1-108, pp. 54–60.
- [18](#) Report from the Federation of Trade Unions to the Centre, 29 May 1956, Shandong, A1-2-393, pp. 54–8; also in Nanjing, 4003-1-108, pp. 54–60.
- [19](#) Report from the Workers’ Union, 25 June 1956, Nanjing, 4003-1-107, pp. 370–6; Nanjing, 4 Feb. 1956, 4003-1-107, p. 48; Nanjing, 20 Feb. 1957, 4003-1-122, p. 25; Survey of Health Conditions in Factories, 1954, Nanjing, 5065-2-142, pp. 52–3.
- [20](#) Hubei, 28 March 1958, SZ44-2-158, pp. 16–59.
- [21](#) Report by the Youth League, 5 Aug. 1956, Shandong, A1-2-393, pp. 103–5.
- [22](#) Kawai Fan and Honkei Lai, ‘Mao Zedong’s Fight against Schistosomiasis’, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 51, no. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 176–87.
- [23](#) The medical debates are reported by David M. Lampton, *The Politics of Medicine in China: The Policy Process, 1949–1977*, Folkestone, Kent: Dawson, 1977, pp. 48 and 64–5; see also Miriam D. Gross, ‘Chasing Snails: Anti-Schistosomiasis Campaigns in the People’s Republic of China’, doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2010.
- [24](#) Report on Eradication Work in the Last Half of 1957, 11 Sept. 1957, Hubei, SZ1-2-405, pp. 25–36.
- [25](#) Report on Leprosy in Xikang Province, 22 Aug. 1951, Sichuan, JK32-158, pp. 1–2; Report on Leprosy in Xikang Province, 1955, Sichuan, JK32-36, p. 8; *Neibu cankao*, 18 Dec. 1952, pp. 256–7; see also JK16-83, 1953, p. 3; Inspection Report on the Leper Colony at Yanbian, 1954, Sichuan, JK16-241, pp. 6–8.
- [26](#) *Neibu cankao*, 13 May 1953, pp. 168–70.
- [27](#) Inspection Report on the Leper Colony at Yanbian, 1954, Sichuan, JK16-241, pp. 6–8; on Guangdong, see *Neibu cankao*, 14 April 1953, pp. 282–3.
- [28](#) *Neibu cankao*, 3 April 1953, pp. 59–61.

## 14: Poisonous Weeds

- [1](#) Taubman, *Khrushchev*, pp. 271–2.
- [2](#) Pang and Jin (eds), *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976*, p. 534; Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, pp. 182–4.

- 3 Taubman, *Khrushchev*, p. 272; Wu Lengxi, *Yi Mao zhuxi: Wo qinshen jingli de ruogan zhongdali shi shijian pianduan* (Remembering Chairman Mao: Fragments of my personal experience of certain important historical events), Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1995, p. 57.
- 4 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 229–30.
- 5 Nanjing, 1957, Nanjing, 4003-1-122, p. 103; Report from the Federation of Labour Unions, 22 Feb. 1957, Nanjing, 4003-1-122, pp. 83–7; the figure of over 10,000 students appears in Report from the Centre, 25 March 1957, Nanjing, 4003-1-122, pp. 78–82.
- 6 Report from the Ministry of Industry, 19 Feb. 1957, Guangdong, 219-2-112, pp. 99–100; Report from the Federation of Labour Unions, 22 Feb. 1957, Nanjing, 4003-1-122, pp. 83–7; Jilin, 20 May 1957, 1-1(13)-50, p. 4; *Neibu cankao*, 24 Sept. 1956, pp. 615–16; 15–16 Nov. 1956, pp. 367–8 and 401–2; 17 Dec. 1956, pp. 342–3.
- 7 Yang Xinpei, Report on Xianju County, 13 Aug. 1957, Shandong, A1-1-318, pp. 93–8; Report from the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee, 20 May 1957, Shandong, A1-1-318, p. 87.
- 8 Guangdong, 23 May 1957, 217-1-30, pp. 10–12; Report from the Shunde County Party Committee, 24 April 1957, Guangdong, 217-1-371, pp. 21–4; Report from the Xinyi County Party Committee, 6 March 1957, Guangdong, 217-1-408, pp. 16–18.
- 9 Guangdong, 15 Sept. 1957, 217-1-30, pp. 90–3.
- 10 Sichuan, 28 May to 15 July 1957, JC1-1155, p. 24.
- 11 Report from the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, 27 Feb. 1957, Nanjing, 4003-1-122, pp. 66–7; Shandong, 9 March 1957, A1-1-318, p. 108; on the miserable world of veterans, see Neil J. Diamant, *Embattled Glory: Veterans, Military Families, and the Politics of Patriotism in China, 1949–2007*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.
- 12 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, p. 231.
- 13 On the Ten Great Relationships, 25 April 1956, circulated on 16 May 1956, Shandong, A1-2-387, pp. 2–17.
- 14 Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, p. 163; Chang and Halliday, *Mao*, p. 401.
- 15 Closing Speech at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, 15 Nov. 1956, Gansu, 91-18-480, pp. 74–6.
- 16 Interjections by Mao at the Second Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, 10-15 Nov. 1956, Gansu, 91-18-480, p. 60; Speech by Luo Ruiqing, 27 Nov. 1956, Hebei, 886-1-18, pp. 45–55.
- 17 Speech by Mao Zedong, 18 Jan. 1957, Gansu, 91-3-57, pp. 57–63; Interjection by Mao, 19 Jan. 1957, Gansu, 91-3-57, p. 77; Interjection by Mao, 23 Jan. 1957, Gansu, 91-3-57, p. 84; Speech by Mao, 27 Jan. 1957, Gansu, 91-3-57, pp. 71–2.
- 18 Speech to Enlarged Session of China's Supreme State Conference, 27 Feb. 1957, Gansu, 91-3-57, pp. 1–41; a translation of a virtually identical version appears in Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek and Eugene Wu (eds), *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao: From the Hundred Flowers to the Great Leap Forward*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 131–89; see also Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 289–2.
- 19 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, p. 293; on other enthusiastic reactions to the speech, see Eddy U, 'Dangerous Privilege: The United Front and the Rectification Campaign of the Early Mao Years', *China Journal*, no. 68 (July 2012), pp. 50–1.
- 20 On Peng Zhen and the *People's Daily*, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 1: *Contradictions among the People, 1956–1957*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974, especially p. 193.
- 21 A good example is his meeting with democrats and representatives of trade and industry, 7 Dec. 1956, Shandong, A1-2-387, p. 71; the quotation about intellectuals is from Mao's speech in Nanjing, 20 March 1957, Shandong, A1-1-312, pp. 2–17.
- 22 The colours of the posters are mentioned in Yue Daiyun, *To the Storm: The Odyssey of a Revolutionary Chinese Woman*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 7; Wu, *A Single Tear*, p. 54.

- 23 Dai Qing, *Liang Shuming, Wang Shiwei, Chu Anping*, Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1989, pp. 236–8; see also Zhang Yihe, *Wangshi bingbu ruyan* (Do not let bygones be bygones), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004; Luo's remark was so hurtful that Mao even commented on it at the summing-up of the Third Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, 9 Oct. 1957, Shandong, A1-1-315, p. 15.
- 24 Dai Huang, 'Righting the Wronged', in Zhang Lijia and Calum MacLeod (eds), *China Remembers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 66; James P. McGough, *Fei Hsiao-t'ung: The Dilemma of a Chinese Intellectual*, White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1979, pp. 61–2.
- 25 Loh, *Escape from Red China*, pp. 304–5.
- 26 Ibid., p. 301.
- 27 Ibid., p. 298; on Wuhan, see Roderick MacFarquhar (ed.), *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals*, New York: Octagon Books, 1974, pp. 143–53.
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- 30 Yue, *To the Storm*, p. 7.
- 31 Li, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, p. 200.
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- 35 MacFarquhar, *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals*, p. 264.
- 36 Zhu, *Fan youpai douzheng shimo*, pp. 275–313; Zhang, *Wangshi bingbu ruyan*; Dai, 'Righting the Wronged', p. 66; McGough, *Fei Hsiao-t'ung*, pp. 79–82.
- 37 Wu, *A Single Tear*, p. 64.
- 38 Yue, *To the Storm*, pp. 7 and 32.
- 39 Report by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, 7 July 1957, Gansu, 91-1-19, pp. 145–8; on the presumed alliance, see Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China*, pp. 235–40.
- 40 Wang Ning, 'The Great Northern Wilderness: Political Exiles in the People's Republic of China', University of British Columbia, doctoral dissertation, 2005, p. 33; Qian Xinbo, 'Jiaoxin cheng "youpai"' (Becoming a rightist by opening one's heart), in Niu Han and Deng Jiuping (eds), *Jingji lu: Jiyou zhong de fanyoupai yundong* (The thorny path: The anti-rightist campaign in memory), Beijing: Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1998, pp. 401–4; Dai, 'Righting the Wronged', p. 67.
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- [43](#) Ding Ling, 'Dao Beidahuang qu' (To the Great Northern Wilderness), in Niu Han and Deng Jiuping (eds), *Yuan shang cao: Jiyi zhong de fanyoupai yundong* (Grass on the land: The anti-rightist campaign in memory), Beijing: Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1998, p. 318.

## Select Bibliography

### Archives

#### *Non-Chinese Archives*

AG SVD – Archivum Generale of the Societas Verbi Divini, Rome

Guoshiguan – National Archives, Hsin-tien, Taiwan

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva

National Archives at College Park – National Archives, Washington

PCE – Archives of the Presbyterian Church of England, SOAS, London

PRO – The National Archives, London

RGASPI – Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii,  
Moscow

#### *Central Archives*

Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Waijiaobu Dang'anguan, Beijing

#### *Provincial Archives*

Gansu – Gansu sheng dang'anguan, Lanzhou

91 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei (Gansu Provincial Party Committee)

96 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Gansu Provincial Party  
Committee Department for Rural Work)

Guangdong – Guangdong sheng dang'anguan, Guangzhou

204 Huanan xingzheng weiyuanhui (Administrative Committee for South China)

217 Guangdong sheng nongcunbu (Guangdong Provincial Bureau for Rural  
Affairs)

Hebei – Hebei sheng dang'anguan, Shijiazhuang

572 Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui (Central Committee of  
the CCP)

684 Zhonggong Rehe shengwei (Rehe Provincial Party Committee)

855 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei (Hebei Provincial Party Committee)

856 Zhonggong Hebei shengjiwei (Hebei Provincial Committee for Inspecting  
Discipline)



- 879 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)
- 886 Hebei shengwei wuren xiaozu bangongshi (Office of the Hebei Provincial Party Committee Five-Man Team)
- 888 Hebei shengwei jieyue jiancha bangongshi (Thrift Investigation Office of the Provincial Party Committee)
- 942 Hebei sheng tongjiju (Hebei Province Office for Statistics)
- 979 Hebei sheng nongyeting (Hebei Province Agricultural Bureau)

Hubei – Hubei sheng dang’anguan, Wuhan

- SZ1 Zhonggong Hubei sheng weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial Party Committee)
- SZ18 Zhonggong Hubei sheng weiyuanhui nongcun zhengzhibu (Hubei Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Politics)
- SZ29 Hubei sheng zonggonghui (Hubei Province Federation of Trade Unions)
- SZ34 Hubei sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial People’s Congress)
- SZ37 Hubei sheng renmin zhengfu tudi gaige weiyuanhui (Hubei Committee for Land Reform)
- SZ44 Hubei sheng tongjiju (Hubei Province Office for Statistics)
- SZ107 Hubei sheng nongyeting (Hubei Province Agricultural Bureau)

Jilin – Jilin sheng dang’anguan, Changchun

- 1 Zhonggong Jilin shengwei (Jilin Provincial Party Committee)
- 2 Jilin sheng renmin zhengfu (Jilin Provincial People’s Government)
- 55 Jilin sheng nongyeting (Jilin Province Agricultural Bureau)

Shaanxi – Shaanxi sheng dang’anguan, Xi’an

- 123 Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei (Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee)
- Shandong – Shandong sheng dang’anguan, Jinan
- G26 Zhonggong Bohaiqu wei (Bohai Region Party Committee)
- G52 Jinluyu bianqu wenjian huiji (Documents from the Jinluyu Base Area)
- A1 Zhonggong Shandong shengwei (Shandong Provincial Party Committee)
- A14 Shandong sheng renmin zhengfu zongjiao shiwuhu (Office for Religious Affairs of the Shandong Municipal People’s Government)

- A29 Shangdong sheng jiaoyuting (Shandong Province Education Bureau)  
A51 Shandong sheng gaoji renmin fayuan (Shandong Higher People's Court)  
A68 Zhongguo renmin yinhang Shandong fenhang (Shandong Branch of the People's Bank of China)  
A101 Shandong sheng renmin zhengfu (Shandong Municipal People's Government)

Sichuan – Sichuan sheng dang'anguan, Chengdu

- JC1 Zhonggong Sichuan shengwei (Sichuan Provincial Party Committee)  
JX1 Zhonggong Jianxi xingshu weiyuanhui (Party Committee of the West Sichuan Region)  
JK1 Zhonggong Xikang shengwei (Xikang Provincial Party Committee)  
JK16 Xikang sheng minzhengting (Xikang Province Bureau for Civil Affairs)  
JK32 Xikang sheng weishengting (Xikang Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

Zhejiang – Zhejiang sheng dang'anguan, Hangzhou

- J007 Zhejiang shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee's Department for Rural Work)  
J103 Zhenjiang shengwei minzhengting (Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee's Bureau for Civil Affairs)

### *Municipal Archives*

Beijing – Beijing shi dang'anguan, Beijing

- 1 Beijing shi weiyuanhui (Beijing Municipal Party Committee)  
2 Beijing shi renmin weiyuanhui (Beijing Municipal People's Congress)  
14 Beijing shi renmin zhengfu zhengfa weiyuanhui (Committee for Law and Politics of the Beijing Municipal People's Congress)

Nanjing – Nanjing shi dang'anguan, Nanjing, Jiangsu

- 4003 Nanjing shiwei (Nanjing Municipal Party Committee)  
5012 Nanjing shi minzhengju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Civil Affairs)  
5034 Nanjing shi gongyeju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Industry)  
5065 Nanjing shi weishengju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

Shanghai – Shanghai shi dang'anguan, Shanghai

A2 Shanghai shiwei bangongting (Office of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee)

A36 Shanghai shiwei gongye zhengzhibu (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee's Bureau for Industry and Politics)

A71 Shanghai shiwei funü lianhehui (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee's All-China Women's Federation)

B1 Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu (Shanghai Municipal People's Government)

B2 Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui zhengfa bangongting (Office for Law and Politics of the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress)

B13 Shanghai shi zengchan jiejue weiyuanhui (Shanghai Municipal Committee on Increased Production and Economic Thrift)

B31 Shanghai shi tongjiju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Statistics)

B182 Shanghai shi gongshanghang guanliju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Supervision of Business)

B242 Shanghai shi weishengju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

C1 Shanghai shi zonggonghui (Shanghai Municipal Federation of Trade Unions)

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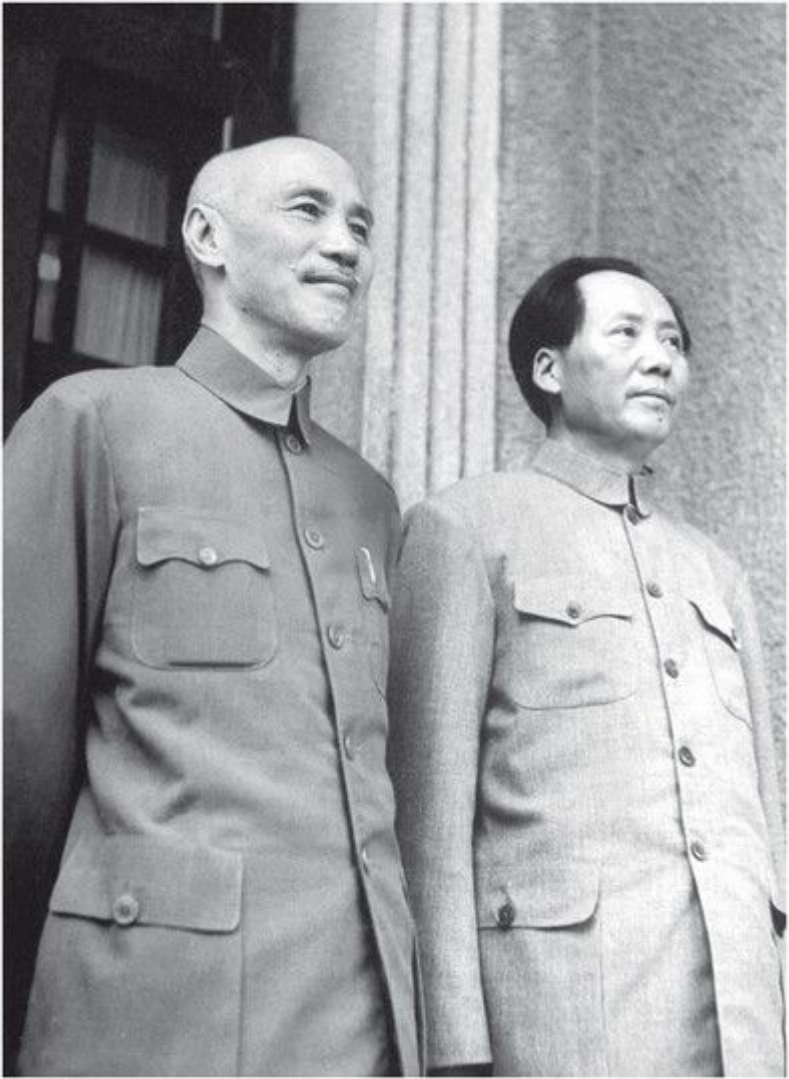
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General Chiang Kai-shek (*left*) and Communist Party leader Mao Zedong, Chongqing, 27 September 1945.



Chinese nationalist troops retreat to the Yangzi River, 31 December 1948.



Soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, Nanjing, April 1949.



Crowds of onlookers observe the first soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, April 1949.



Lin Biao, the commander who oversaw the siege of Changchun and conquered Manchuria.



J. Leighton Stuart standing in front of a poster of General George C. Marshall.



Zhou Enlai in Moscow, heading a delegation of government and military leaders in 1952.



Victory parade, Shanghai, June 1949, shortly after the communists had taken the city.





Shanghai, June 1949, as the communists take control.



An evacuation ship transporting refugees.





Refugees of the civil war, April 1949.



Mao Zedong proclaims the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing.



Chinese communists carry placards bearing pictures of Joseph Stalin, as they celebrate the first anniversary of the new regime in China.



An alleged 'landlord' facing a People's Tribunal minutes before being executed by a shot to the back in a village in Guangdong, July 1952.



A grief-stricken woman stands amid the ruins of a village just north of Caolaoji, destroyed by fighting during the civil war.

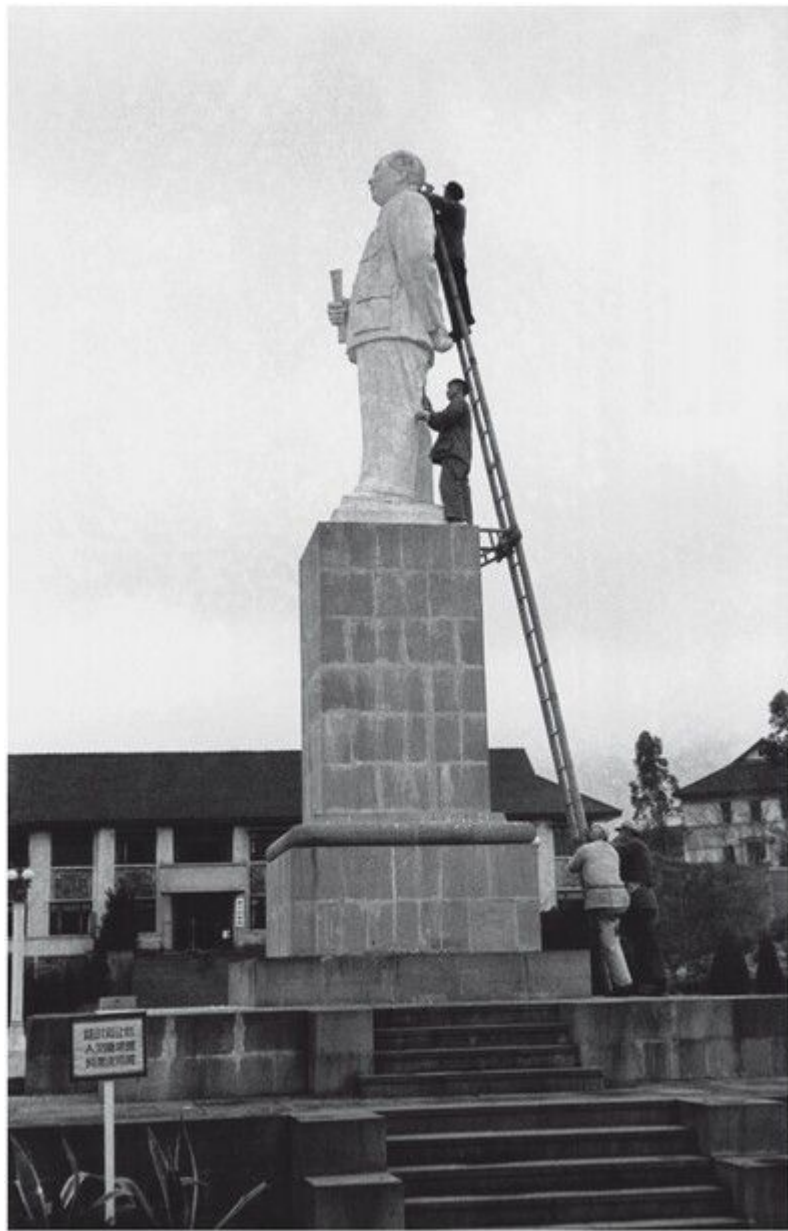


Yue Songsheng, a representative of industry and commerce, presents a red envelope to Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong during the official celebration of the 'Successful Socialist Transformation', at Tian'anmen Square, 15 January 1956.

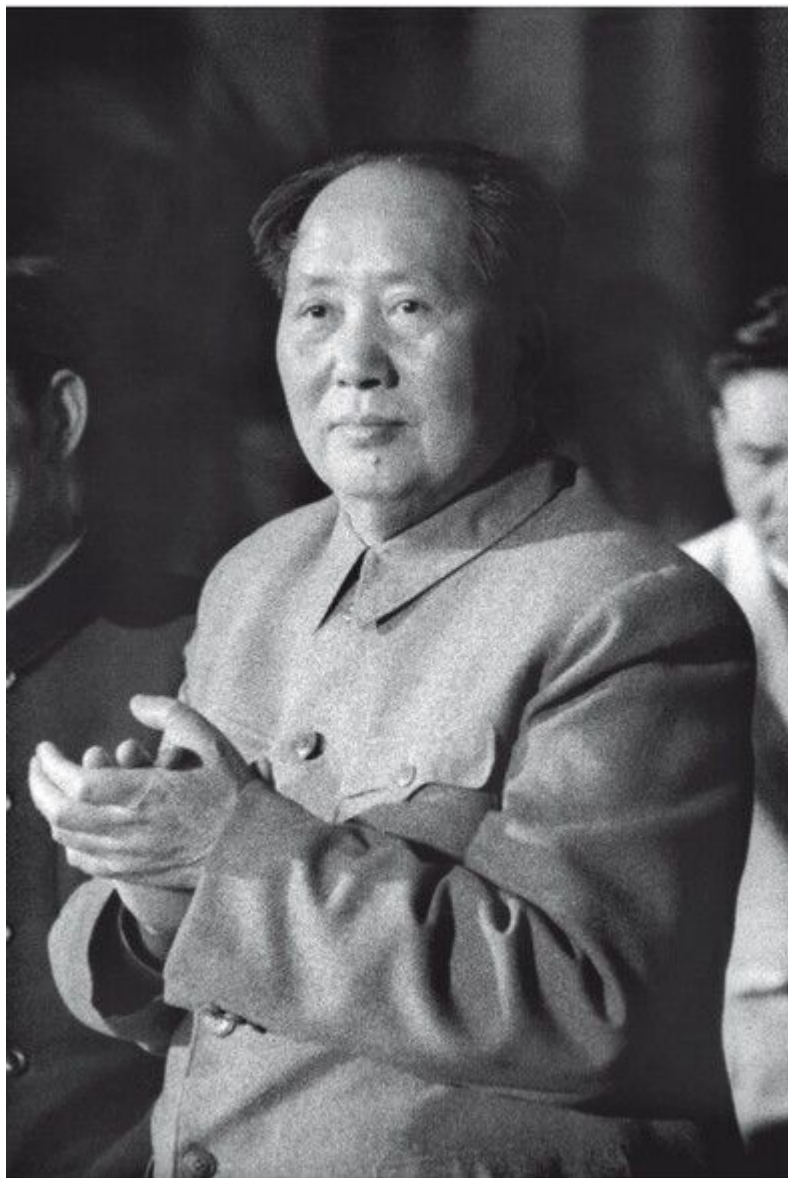


Queue outside a food shop, 1957.





Maintenance of a statue of Mao.



Mao Zedong in 1957.









Between 1958 and 1962, 45 million Chinese people were worked, starved or beaten to death. Mao Zedong threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up with and overtake the Western world in less than fifteen years. It led to one of the greatest catastrophes the world has ever known. Dikotter's extraordinary research within Chinese archives brings together for the first time what happened in the corridors of power with the everyday experiences of ordinary people, giving voice to the dead and disenfranchised. This groundbreaking account definitively recasts the history of the People's Republic of China.

‘A masterly book that should be read not just by anybody interested in modern Chinese history but also by anybody concerned with the way in which a simple idea propagated by an autocratic national leader can lead a country to disaster, in this case to a degree that beggars the imagination’ *Observer*

‘Written with great narrative verve’ Simon Sebag Montefiore,

‘A brilliant work, backed by painstaking research ... This book sheds light on many aspects of the famine but its great importance is to remind us of why we need to revise our understanding of twentieth-century history’ Jasper Becker, *Spectator*

‘It is hard to exaggerate the achievement of this book in proving that Mao caused the famine. ... Only thanks to brilliant scholarship such as this will the heirs of the vanished millions finally learn what happened to their ancestors’ *Sunday Times*

‘A masterpiece of historical investigation into one of the world’s greatest crimes’ *New Statesman*

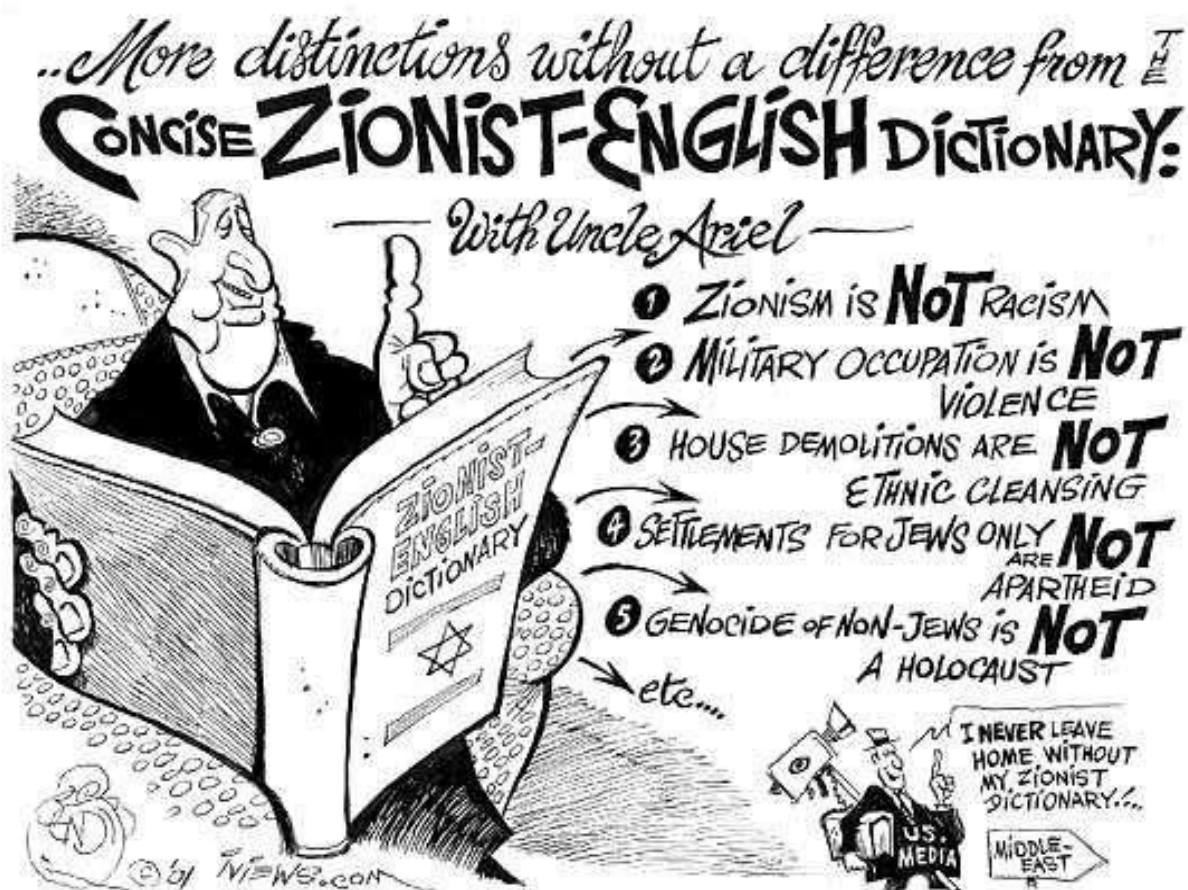
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# COMMUNIST CHINA's MASSIVE FAMINE GREAT LEAP FORWARD



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## Preface

Between 1958 and 1962, China descended into hell. Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, threw his country into a frenzy with the Great Leap Forward, an attempt to catch up with and overtake Britain in less than fifteen years. By unleashing China's greatest asset, a labour force that was counted in the hundreds of millions, Mao thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors. Instead of following the Soviet model of development, which leaned heavily towards industry alone, China would 'walk on two legs': the peasant masses were mobilised to transform both agriculture and industry at the same time, converting a backward economy into a modern communist society of plenty for all. In the pursuit of a utopian paradise, everything was collectivised, as villagers were herded together in giant communes which heralded the advent of communism. People in the countryside were robbed of their work, their homes, their land, their belongings and their livelihood. Food, distributed by the spoonful in collective canteens according to merit, became a weapon to force people to follow the party's every dictate. Irrigation campaigns forced up to half the villagers to work for weeks on end on giant water-conservancy projects, often far from home, without adequate food and rest. The experiment ended in the greatest catastrophe the country had ever known, destroying tens of millions of lives.

Unlike comparable disasters, for instance those that took place under Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin, the true dimensions of what happened during the Great Leap Forward remain little known. This is because access to the party archives has long been restricted to all but the most trusted historians backed up with party credentials. But a new archive law has recently opened up vast quantities of archival material to professional historians, fundamentally changing the way one can study the Maoist era. This book is based on well over a thousand archival documents, collected over several years in dozens of party archives, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing and large provincial collections in Hebei, Shandong, Gansu, Hubei, Hunan, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan and Guangdong to smaller but equally invaluable collections in cities and counties all over China. The material includes secret reports from the Public Security Bureau, detailed minutes of top party meetings, unexpurgated versions of important leadership speeches, surveys of working conditions in the countryside, investigations into cases of mass murder, confessions of leaders responsible for the deaths of millions of people, inquiries compiled by special teams sent in to discover the extent of the catastrophe in the last stages of the Great Leap Forward, general reports on peasant resistance during the collectivisation campaign, secret opinion surveys, letters of complaint written by ordinary people and much more.

What comes out of this massive and detailed dossier transforms our understanding of the Great Leap Forward. When it comes to the overall death toll, for instance, researchers so far have had to extrapolate from official population statistics, including the census figures of 1953, 1964 and 1982. Their estimates range from 15 to 32 million excess deaths. But the public security reports compiled at the time, as well as the voluminous secret reports collated by party committees in the last months of the Great Leap Forward, show how inadequate these calculations are, pointing instead at a catastrophe of a much greater magnitude: this book shows that at least 45 million people died unnecessarily between 1958 and 1962.

The term 'famine', or even 'Great Famine', is often used to describe these four to five years of the Maoist era, but the term fails to capture the many ways in which people died under radical collectivisation. The blithe use of the term 'famine' also lends support to the widespread view that these deaths were the unintended consequence of half-baked and poorly executed economic programmes. Mass killings are not usually associated with Mao and the Great Leap Forward, and China continues to benefit from a more favourable comparison with the devastation usually associated with Cambodia or the Soviet Union. But as the fresh evidence presented in this book demonstrates, coercion, terror and systematic violence were the foundation of the Great Leap Forward. Thanks to the often meticulous reports compiled by the party itself, we can infer that between 1958 and 1962 by a rough approximation 6 to 8 per cent of the victims were tortured to death or summarily killed – amounting to at least 2.5 million people. Other victims were deliberately deprived of food and starved to death. Many more vanished because they were too old, weak or sick to work – and hence unable to earn their keep. People were killed selectively because they were rich, because they dragged their feet, because they spoke out or simply because they were not liked, for whatever reason, by the man who wielded the ladle in the canteen. Countless people were killed indirectly through neglect, as local cadres were under pressure to focus on figures rather than on people, making sure they fulfilled the targets they were handed by the top planners.

A vision of promised abundance not only motivated one of the most deadly mass killings of human history, but also inflicted unprecedented damage on agriculture, trade, industry and transportation. Pots, pans and tools were thrown into backyard furnaces to increase the country's steel output, which was seen as one of the magic markers of progress. Livestock declined precipitously, not only because animals were slaughtered for the export market but also because they succumbed en masse to disease and hunger – despite extravagant schemes for giant piggeries that would bring meat to every table. Waste developed because raw resources and supplies were poorly allocated, and because factory bosses deliberately bent the rules to increase output. As everyone cut corners in the relentless pursuit of higher output, factories spewed out inferior goods that accumulated uncollected by railway sidings. Corruption seeped into the fabric of life, tainting everything from soy sauce to hydraulic dams. The transportation system creaked to a halt before collapsing altogether, unable to cope with the demands created by a command economy. Goods worth hundreds of millions of yuan accumulated in canteens, dormitories and even on the streets, a lot of the stock simply rotting or rusting away. It would have been difficult to design a more wasteful system, one in which grain was left uncollected by dusty roads in the countryside as people foraged for roots or ate mud.

The book also documents how the attempt to leap into communism resulted in the greatest demolition of property in human history – by far outstripping any of the Second World War bombing campaigns. Up to 40 per cent of all housing was turned into rubble, as homes were pulled down to create fertiliser, to build canteens, to relocate villagers, to straighten roads, to make room for a better future or simply to punish their occupants. The natural world did not escape unscathed either. We will never know the full extent of forest coverage lost during the Great Leap Forward, but a prolonged and intense attack on nature claimed up to half of all trees in some provinces. The rivers and waterways suffered too: throughout the country dams and canals, built by hundreds of millions of farmers at great human and economic cost, were for the greatest part rendered useless or even dangerous, resulting in landslides, river silting, soil salinisation and devastating inundations.

The significance of the book thus is by no means confined to the famine. What it chronicles, often in harrowing detail, is the near collapse of a social and economic system on which Mao had staked his prestige. As the catastrophe unfolded, the Chairman lashed out at his critics to maintain his position as the indispensable leader of the party. After the famine came to an end, however, new factional alignments appeared that were strongly opposed to the Chairman: to stay in power he had to turn the country upside down with the Cultural Revolution. The pivotal event in the history of the People's Republic of China was the Great Leap Forward. Any attempt to understand what happened in communist China must start by placing it squarely at the very centre of the entire Maoist period. In a far more general way, as the modern world struggles to find a balance between freedom and regulation, the catastrophe unleashed at the time stands as a reminder of how profoundly misplaced is the idea of state planning as an antidote to chaos.

The book introduces fresh evidence about the dynamics of power in a one-party state. The politics behind the Great Leap Forward has been studied by political scientists on the basis of official statements, semi-official documents or Red Guard material released during the Cultural Revolution, but none of these censored sources reveals what happened behind closed doors. The full picture of what was said and done in the corridors of power will be known only once the Central Party Archives in Beijing open their doors to researchers, and this is unlikely to happen in the near future. But the minutes of many key meetings can be found in provincial archives, since local leaders often attended the most important party gatherings and had to be kept informed of developments in Beijing. The archives throw a very different light on the leadership: as some of the top-secret meetings come to light, we see the vicious backstabbing and bullying tactics that took place among party leaders in all their rawness. The portrait that emerges of Mao himself is hardly flattering, and is far removed from the public image he so carefully cultivated: rambling in his speeches, obsessed with his own role in history, often dwelling on past slights, a master at using his emotions to browbeat his way through a meeting, and, above all, insensitive to human loss.

We know that Mao was the key architect of the Great Leap Forward, and thus bears the main responsibility for the catastrophe that followed.<sup>1</sup> He had to work hard to push through his vision, bargaining, cajoling, goading, occasionally tormenting or persecuting his colleagues. Unlike Stalin, he did not drag his rivals into a dungeon to have them executed, but he did have the power to remove them from office, terminating their careers – and the many privileges which came with a top position in the party. The campaign to overtake Britain started with Chairman Mao, and it ended when he grudgingly allowed his colleagues to return to a more gradual approach in

economic planning a few years later. But he would never have been able to prevail if Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, the next two most powerful party leaders, had acted against him. They, in turn, whipped up support from other senior colleagues, as chains of interests and alliances extended all the way down to the village – as is documented here for the first time. Ferocious purges were carried out, as lacklustre cadres were replaced with hard, unscrupulous men who trimmed their sails to benefit from the radical winds blowing from Beijing.

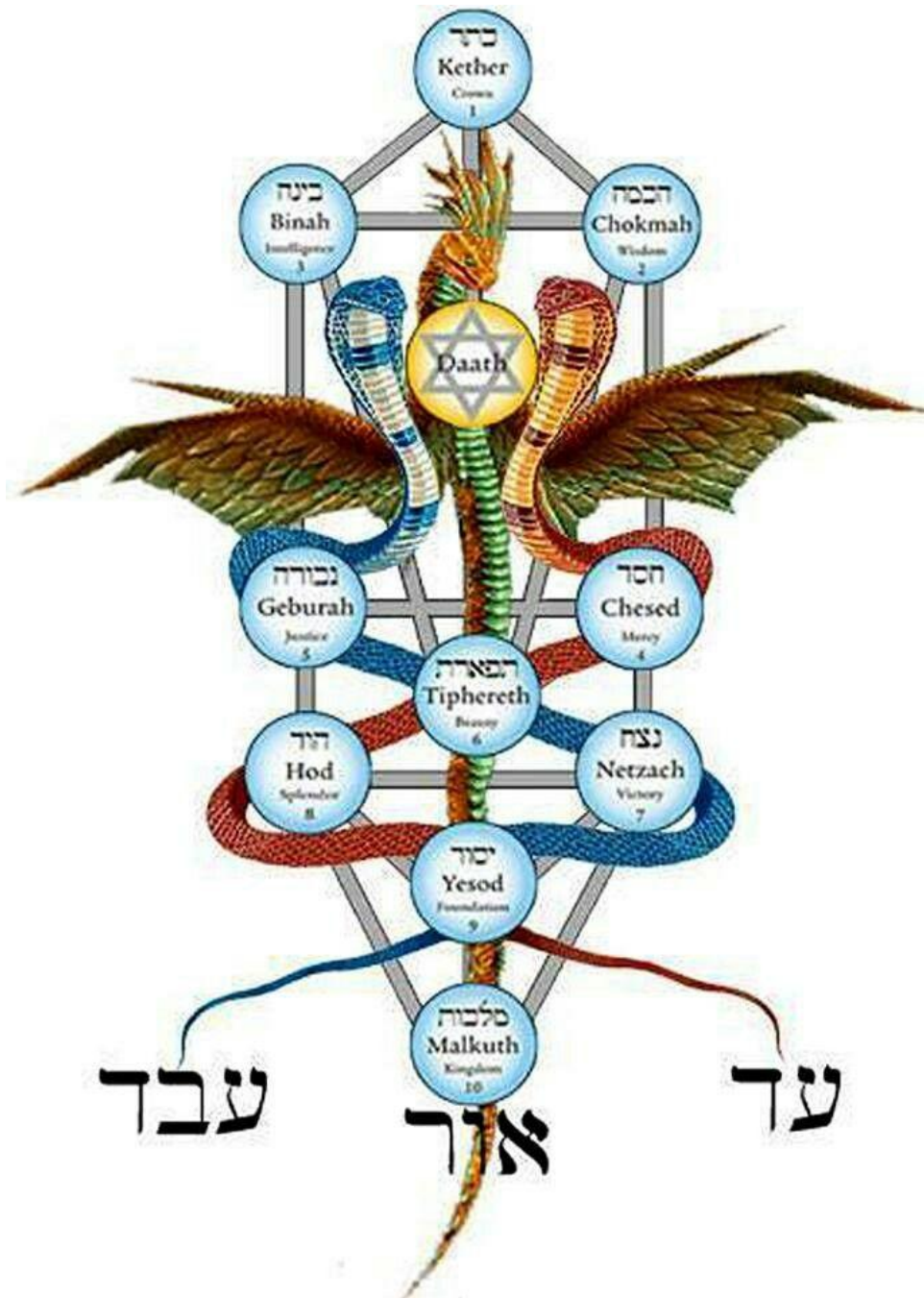
But most of all this book brings together two dimensions of the catastrophe that have so far been studied in isolation. We must link up what happened in the corridors of Zhongnanhai, the compound which served as the headquarters of the party in Beijing, with the everyday experiences of ordinary people. With the exception of a few village studies based on interviews, there is simply no social history of the Maoist era, let alone of the famine.<sup>2</sup> And just as the fresh evidence from the archives shows how responsibility for the catastrophe extended far beyond Mao, the profuse documentation which the party compiled on every aspect of daily life under its rule dispels the common notion of the people as mere victims. Despite the vision of social order the regime projected at home and abroad, the party never managed to impose its grand design, encountering a degree of covert opposition and subversion that would have been unheard of in any country with an elected government. In contrast to the image of a strictly disciplined communist society in which errors at the top cause the entire machinery to grind to a halt, the portrait that emerges from archives and interviews is one of a society in disintegration, leaving people to resort to whatever means were available to survive. So destructive was radical collectivisation that at every level the population tried to circumvent, undermine or exploit the master plan, secretly giving full scope to the profit motive that the party tried to eliminate. As famine spread, the very survival of an ordinary person came increasingly to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state. As Robert Service points out, in the Soviet Union these phenomena were not so much the grit that stopped the machinery as the oil that prevented the system from coming to a complete standstill.<sup>3</sup> A 'perfect' communist state could not provide enough incentives for people to collaborate, and without some degree of accommodation of the profit motive it would have destroyed itself. No communist regime would have managed to stay in power for so long without constant infringements of the party line.

Survival depended on disobedience, but the many strategies of survival devised by people at all levels, from farmers hiding the grain to local cadres cooking the account books, also tended to prolong the life of the regime. They became a part of the system. Obfuscation was the communist way of life. People lied to survive, and as a consequence information was distorted all the way up to the Chairman. The planned economy required huge inputs of accurate data, yet at every level targets were distorted, figures were inflated and policies which clashed with local interests were ignored. As with the profit motive, individual initiative and critical thought had to be constantly suppressed, and a permanent state of siege developed.

Some historians might interpret these acts of survival as evidence of 'resistance', or 'weapons of the weak' pitting 'peasants' against 'the state'. But techniques of survival extended from one end of the social spectrum to the other. Just about everybody, from top to bottom, stole during the famine, so much so that if these were acts of 'resistance' the party would have collapsed at a very early stage. It may be tempting to glorify what appears at first sight to be a morally appealing culture of resistance by ordinary people, but when food was finite, one individual's gain was all too often another's loss. When farmers hid the grain, the workers outside the village died of hunger. When a factory employee added sand to the flour, somebody down the line was chewing grit. To romanticise what were often utterly desperate ways of surviving is to see the world in black and white, when in reality collectivisation forced everybody, at one point or another, to make grim moral compromises. Routine degradations thus went hand in hand with mass destruction. Primo Levi, in his memoir of Auschwitz, notes that survivors are rarely heroes: when somebody places himself above others in a world dominated by the law of survival, his sense of morality changes. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi called it the grey zone, showing how inmates determined to survive had to stray from their moral values in order to obtain an extra ration. He tried not to judge but to explain, unwrapping layer by layer the operation of the concentration camps. Understanding the complexity of human behaviour in times of catastrophe is one of the aims of this book as well, and the party archives allow us for the first time to get closer to the difficult choices people made half a century ago – whether in the corridors of power or inside the hut of a starving family far away from the capital.

The first two parts of the book explain how and why the Great Leap Forward unfolded, identifying the key turning points and charting the ways in which the lives of millions were shaped by decisions taken by a select

few at the top. Part 3 looks at the scale of destruction, from agriculture, industry, trade and housing to the natural environment. Part 4 shows how the grand plan was transformed by the everyday strategies of survival by ordinary people to produce something that nobody intended and few could quite recognise. In the cities workers stole, dragged their feet or actively sabotaged the command economy, while in the countryside farmers resorted to a whole repertoire of acts of survival, ranging from eating the grain straight from the fields to taking to the road in search of a better life elsewhere. Others robbed granaries, set fire to party offices, assaulted freight trains and, occasionally, organised armed rebellions against the regime. But the ability of people to survive was very much limited by their position in an elaborate social hierarchy which pitted the party against the people. And some of these people were more vulnerable than others: Part 5 looks at the lives of children, women and the elderly. Finally, Part 6 traces the many ways in which people died, from accidents, disease, torture, murder and suicide to starvation. An Essay on the Sources at the end of the book explains the nature of the archival evidence in more detail.





# Chronology

1949:

The Chinese Communist Party conquers the mainland and establishes the People's Republic of China on 1 October. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the defeated Guomindang, takes refuge on the island of Taiwan. In December Mao leaves for Moscow to pursue a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union and seek help from Stalin.

October 1950:

China enters the Korean War.

March 1953:

Stalin dies.

Autumn 1955–spring 1956:

Mao, displeased with the slow pace of economic development, pushes for the accelerated collectivisation of the countryside and for huge increases in the production of grain, cotton, coal and steel. His 'Socialist High Tide', also referred to by some historians as the 'Little Leap Forward', produces industrial shortages and famine in parts of the countryside. Zhou Enlai and other economic planners urge a slower pace of collectivisation in the spring of 1956.

February 1956:

Khrushchev denounces Stalin and the cult of personality in a secret speech in Moscow. Criticism of Stalin's disastrous campaign of collectivisation strengthens the position of those opposed to the Socialist High Tide in China. Mao perceives deStalinisation as a challenge to his own authority.

Autumn 1956:

A reference to 'Mao Zedong Thought' is removed from the party constitution, the principle of collective leadership is lauded and the cult of personality is decried. The Socialist High Tide is halted.

October 1956:

Encouraged by deStalinisation, people in Hungary revolt against their own government, forcing Soviet forces to invade the country, crush all opposition and install a new regime with Moscow's backing.

Winter 1956–spring 1957:

Mao, against the wishes of most of his colleagues, encourages a more open political climate with the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign to secure the support of scientists and intellectuals in developing the economy and avoid the social unrest that led to the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

Summer 1957:

The campaign backfires as a mounting barrage of criticism questions the very right of the party to rule. Mao turns around and accuses these critical voices of being 'bad elements' bent on destroying the party. He puts Deng Xiaoping in charge of an anti-rightist campaign, which persecutes half a million people – many of them students and intellectuals deported to remote areas to do hard labour. The party finds unity behind its Chairman.

November 1957:

Mao visits Moscow. Impressed by the Soviet sputnik, the first satellite launched into orbit, he declares that the 'East wind prevails over the west wind.' In response to Khrushchev's announcement that the Soviet Union will outstrip the United States in economic production in fifteen years, he declares that China will overtake Britain in the same period.

Winter 1957–spring 1958:

In a series of party conferences Mao attacks Zhou Enlai and other senior leaders who opposed his economic policy. He promotes his own vision of mass mobilisation and accelerated collectivisation of the countryside, demanding increased agricultural and industrial targets. The slogan 'going all out, aiming high, and achieving more, faster and more economical results' becomes the party line.

Winter 1957–summer 1958:

A campaign of repression targets hundreds of thousands of party members critical of economic policy. Several provincial party leaders are purged and replaced by close followers of Mao. Opposition from within the party is silenced.

Winter 1957–spring 1958:

A massive water-conservancy campaign is launched, marking the start of the 'Great Leap Forward' for hundreds of millions of ordinary villagers compelled to work for weeks on end on remote projects, often without sufficient rest and food.

Summer 1958:

Khrushchev visits Beijing, but tensions appear as Mao decides to shell several islands in the Taiwan Strait without first consulting his Soviet ally, triggering an international crisis with the United States. Moscow is forced to take sides by throwing its weight behind Beijing, proclaiming that an attack on the People's Republic of China would be considered an attack on the Soviet Union.

Summer 1958:

The mass mobilisation of villagers around huge water projects requires much larger administrative units in the countryside, leading to the amalgamation of farm collectives into gigantic people's communes of up to 20,000 households. Everyday life in the communes is run along military lines. Almost everything, including land and labour, is collectivised. Communal dining replaces private kitchens, while children are left in the care of boarding kindergartens. A work-point system is used to calculate rewards, while even money is abolished in some communes. Backyard furnaces are used to melt all sorts of metal objects in order to contribute to the party's escalating steel target. Famine conditions appear in many parts of the country.

November 1958–February 1959:

Mao turns against local cadres who produce inflated targets and promise an imminent transition to communism. He tries to rein in some of the worst abuses of the Great Leap Forward, but continues to push forward with collectivisation. He announces that mistakes made by the party are only 'one finger out of ten'. In order to meet foreign obligations and feed the cities, food procurements in the countryside increase sharply. The famine spreads.

March 1959:

At a Shanghai conference Mao launches a withering attack on senior party members and presses for even higher procurement targets in the countryside, up to a third of all grain, despite widespread famine.

July 1959:

At the Lushan conference Mao denounces Peng Dehuai and other leaders as an 'anti-party clique' for criticising the Great Leap Forward.

Summer 1959–summer 1960:

A campaign of repression is launched against party members who expressed critical views similar to Peng Dehuai and his allies. Tens of millions of villagers die of starvation, disease or torture.

July 1960:

Soviet advisers are withdrawn from China by Khrushchev. Zhou Enlai and Li Fuchun move the trade structure away from the Soviet Union towards the West.

October 1960:

A report on mass starvation in Xinyang, Henan, is handed over to Mao by Li Fuchun.

November 1960:

An emergency directive is issued allowing villagers to keep private plots, engage in sideline occupations, rest for eight hours a day and restore local markets, among other measures designed to weaken the power of the communes over villagers.

Winter 1960–1:

Investigation teams spread over the countryside, bringing to light the full dimensions of the catastrophe. Large quantities of food are imported from the West.

Spring 1961:

Inspection tours by leading party members result in a further retreat from the Great Leap Forward. Liu Shaoqi places the blame for the famine on the shoulders of the party but absolves Mao of all responsibility.

Summer 1961:

The consequences of the Great Leap Forward are discussed at a series of party meetings.

January 1962:

At an enlarged party gathering of thousands of cadres in Beijing, Liu Shaoqi describes the famine as a man-made disaster. Support for Mao wanes. The famine abates, but continues to claim lives in parts of the countryside until the end of 1962.

1966:

of Sir William Wiseman of the British Secret Service stationed in this country. In spite of the fact that it has so often been discredited, it is a fact that all it contains has been proven from other sources. In this report was the statement, 'we will use the movement of the Earl of Dysart, the British Israel World Federation movement.' The status is much the same as that of the Protocols, so vigorously denied, but if you will refer to the Jewish Year Book, page 179, 1920-1921, you will find the reference to the Protocols. There is no denial of the Protocols or their authenticity but there is the statement 'that the translator omitted a paragraph in which England is accused of being the accomplice of the Jews in this conspiracy.'

It was in 1935 that the Earl of Strafford, Thomas Wentworth, addressed an 'Admonition to King George V, in which he told the King to stop playing with this Communist movement, that it was Satanic, against the realm. He referred to the British Israel World Federation movement of 6 Buckingham Gate, London. You can call the British Library of Information if you wish to satisfy yourself that such a movement exists. You will find the name of Sir William Wiseman listed as one of the supporters on the back cover of the National Message.

In this country the movement, now known as the Anglo-Saxon Federation of America, was located in the Fox Building, Detroit and the organ now called 'Destiny' was then called the 'Messenger of the Covenant.'

The Anglo-Saxon Federation of America was established at the time the Dearborn Independent was being published. William J. Cameron, Henry Ford's man Friday was the editor of the paper. The protocols had been brought to this country from England, they were taken to Mr. Cameron. Two or more people have claimed the honor of taking them to Mr. Ford or Mr. Cameron, one, Haviland Lund, who had spent several years in England. Mrs. Lund had taken the 'missing Tea Pot Dome leases' to President Harding from Secretary Fall's office where she was employed. Marcia, well known in Washington circles as the advisor to many in the field of predictions, accompanied her. The story was related to me when Mrs. Lund and I paid her a call. Those most interested in Tea Pot Dome did not want Mrs. Lund called to testify so she was sent to England. It was on her return that she brought the protocols and told me that she had taken them to Mr. Cameron.

After these protocols were published Lt. Col. W. G. Mac Kendrick, of the Commonwealth Publishing Company, Toronto, Canada, with a convert Merton H. Smith went to Detroit, called on Mr. Cameron, told him he was making a mistake in publishing the Protocols and sold him the idea of British Israel World Federation.

Mr. Cameron was British born (Canada) he had lived in this country for over forty years and had voted all that time without being a citizen. It was only when he wished to leave the country and get a passport to return that he was made a citizen in three days by Judge Moinet (federal). See New York American, September 12, 1935. See also New Money Pamphlet.

Through Mr. Cameron, Henry Ford was interested and became a liberal supporter financially of this propaganda. So great was Mr. Ford's interest that if you wished to reach him on a public question, as happened with one of my friends, you were told that if you did not know or did not go along with British Israel you would not succeed in that which you sought.



# China in 1958

SOVIET UNION



# The Pursuit of Utopia

## GRAND LODGE - FREEMASONS



**Bush, Putin and China's president photo taken at a secret Grand Lodge meeting. They are all in the same club, answering to the same Lord, pretending that they are enemies because that keeps them in power, so they can introduce even tighter Draconian measures in each of their respective countries to keep the swill down and ensure THEIR BREED stays on top.**

## Two Rivals

Stalin's death in 1953 was Mao's liberation. For more than thirty years Mao had had to play supplicant to the leader of the communist world. From the age of twenty-seven, when he was handed his first cash payment of 200 yuan by a Soviet agent to cover the cost of travelling to the founding meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, Mao's life was transformed by Russian funds. He had no qualms about taking the money, and used the Moscow link to lead a ragged band of guerrilla fighters to ultimate power – but not without endless reprimands from Moscow, expulsions from office and battles over party policy with Soviet advisers. Stalin constantly forced Mao back into the arms of his sworn enemy Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the nationalist Guomintang that ruled much of China. Stalin placed little faith in Mao and his peasant soldiers, and openly favoured Chiang, even after the Guomintang had presided over a bloody massacre of communists in Shanghai in 1927. For the best part of a decade Chiang's troops relentlessly hounded an embattled Mao, forcing the communists to find refuge on a mountain base and then to traverse some 12,500 kilometres towards the north in a retreat later known as the Long March. When Chiang was kidnapped in Xi'an in 1936, Stalin promptly sent a telegram ordering Mao to release his hostage unharmed. After Japan had invaded China a year later, Stalin demanded that Mao again form a United Front with his arch enemy Chiang, sending planes, arms and advisers to the Guomintang regime. All Mao got during the Second World War was a planeload of propaganda leaflets.

Instead of confronting the Japanese, Mao strengthened his forces in northern China. At the war's end in 1945 Stalin, always the hard pragmatist, signed a treaty of alliance with the Guomintang, diminishing the prospects of support for the communists in the event of a civil war. Soon after Japan's surrender, full-scale war between the communists and the nationalists resumed. Stalin, again, stayed on the sidelines, even warning Mao to beware the United States, which had sided with Chiang Kai-shek, now recognised as a world leader in the Allies' defeat of Japan. Mao ignored his advice. The communists eventually gained the upper hand. When they reached the capital, Nanjing, the Soviet Union was one of the few foreign countries to permit its ambassador to flee alongside the Guomintang.

Even when victory seemed inevitable, Stalin continued to keep Mao at arm's length. Everything about him seemed suspicious to the Soviet leader. What kind of communist was afraid of workers, Stalin wondered repeatedly, as Mao stopped his army outside Shanghai for weeks on end, unwilling to take on the task of feeding the city? Mao was a peasant, a caveman Marxist, Stalin determined after reading translations of the Chinese leader's writings, which he dismissed as 'feudal'. That there was a rebellious and stubborn streak in Mao was clear; his victory over Chiang Kai-shek, forced to retreat all the way to Taiwan, would have been difficult to explain otherwise. But pride and independence were precisely what troubled Stalin so deeply, prone as he was to seeing enemies everywhere: could this be another Tito, the Yugoslav leader who had been cast out of the communist family for his dissidence against Moscow? Tito was bad enough, and Stalin did not relish the prospect of a regime that had come to power without his help running a sprawling empire right on his border. Stalin trusted no one, least of all a potential rival who in all probability harboured a long list of grievances.

Mao, indeed, never forgot a snub and deeply resented the way he had been treated by Stalin, but he had no one else to turn to for support. The communist regime desperately needed international recognition as well as economic help in rebuilding the war-torn country. Mao declared a policy of 'leaning to one side', swallowing his pride and seeking a rapprochement with the Soviet Union.

Several requests to meet Stalin were rebuffed. Then, in December 1949, Mao was finally asked to come to Moscow. But rather than being welcomed as the leader of a great revolution that had brought a quarter of humanity into the communist orbit, he was given the cold shoulder, treated as one guest among many other delegates who had travelled to Moscow to celebrate Stalin's seventieth birthday. After a brief meeting Mao was whisked off to a dacha outside the capital and left to wait in isolation for several weeks for a formal audience. With every passing day he was made to learn his humble place in a communist brotherhood which revolved entirely around the Soviet dictator. When Mao and Stalin met at last, all he got was \$300 million in military aid



divided over five years. For this paltry sum Mao had to throw in major territorial concessions, privileges that harked back to the unequal treaties in the nineteenth century: Soviet control of Lüshun (Port Arthur) and of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria was guaranteed until the mid-1950s. Rights to mineral deposits in Xinjiang, China's westernmost province, also had to be conceded. But Mao did obtain a treaty providing for mutual protection in the event of aggression by Japan or its allies, in particular the United States.

Even before Mao and Stalin had signed the Alliance and Friendship Treaty, Kim Il-sung, the communist guerrilla fighter who seized control of the north of Korea after his country's division in 1948, had been contemplating the reunification of the peninsula by military force. Mao supported North Korea, seeing in Kim a communist ally against the United States. The Korean War broke out in June 1950, but it prompted American intervention in defence of the south. Faced with overwhelming air power and tank battalions, an embattled Kim was pushed back all the way to the Sino-North Korean border. Worried that the Americans might cross the Yalu River and attack China, Mao dispatched volunteers to fight in Korea, having been promised air cover by Stalin. A ferocious war followed, the casualties on the Chinese side all the higher as the planes that Stalin had pledged came only sparingly. When the conflict reached a bloody stalemate, Stalin repeatedly obstructed negotiations to bring it to an end. Peace was not in his strategic interests. To add insult to injury, Stalin also demanded payment from China for the Soviet military equipment he had sent to Korea. His death in March 1953 brought about a rapid armistice.

For thirty years Mao had suffered humiliation at the hands of Stalin, willingly subordinating himself to Moscow out of sheer strategic necessity. The Korean War had made him even more resentful of the Soviet Union's patronage, a feeling widely shared by his fellow leaders who likewise craved a sense of equality in their country's dealings with Moscow.

The Korean War also deepened Mao's hold over his colleagues. The Chairman had led the party to victory in 1949. Korea, too, was his personal glory, as he had pushed for intervention when other leaders in the party had wavered. He was the man who had fought the United States to a stalemate – albeit at a huge cost to his own soldiers. He now towered above his peers. Mao, like Stalin, was incapable of seeing anybody as an equal, and, like Stalin, the Chairman had no doubt about his own role in history. He was sure of his own genius and infallibility.

After Stalin's death Mao finally saw a chance to secure independence from the Kremlin and claim leadership of the socialist camp. The Chairman naturally assumed that he was the leading light of communism, which was about to crush capitalism, making him the historical pivot around which the universe revolved. Had he not led his men to victory, bringing a second October Revolution to a quarter of the world? Stalin could not even claim to have presided over the Bolshevik revolution; still less could Nikita Khrushchev, the man who soon took charge in Moscow.

Coarse, erratic and impulsive, Khrushchev was viewed by many who knew him as an oaf limited in both ability and ambition. It was precisely this reputation which had allowed him to survive under Stalin, who treated him with an affectionate condescension that saved him from the fate of far more impressive colleagues who blundered in their dealings with the dictator. 'My little Marx!' Stalin once mockingly called him, gently tapping his pipe against Khrushchev's forehead and joking, 'It's hollow!'<sup>1</sup> Khrushchev was Stalin's pet. But he was as paranoid as Stalin, and underneath deceptive clumsiness was a cunning and hugely ambitious man.

Khrushchev was scathing of Stalin's handling of Mao, and resolved to outdo his former master by putting relations with Beijing on a new footing. He would be Mao's benevolent tutor, steering the peasant rebel towards a more enlightened form of Marxism. Khrushchev also played the role of beneficent patron, presiding over a massive transfer of technology as hundreds of factories and plants were financed with Soviet aid. Advisers in every domain, from atomic energy to mechanical engineering, were sent to China, while some 10,000 Chinese students were trained in the Soviet Union in the first years following Stalin's death. But instead of showing gratitude, leaders in Beijing saw this largesse as their due, seeking to extract ever greater amounts of economic and military support through a mixture of bargaining, begging and cajoling. Khrushchev gave in. Having overplayed his hand, he had to bully his colleagues in Moscow into accepting an aid package that far outstripped what the Soviet Union could afford.

Khrushchev went out on a limb to satisfy Beijing, and he expected a lot in return. Mao instead treated him with contempt, locking the man into the role of the boorish, immature upstart from which he had been so keen to escape. The key turning point came in 1956, when Khrushchev denounced the crimes of his former master in

a secret report delivered at a party congress – without consulting Mao. The Chairman praised this speech, as he sensed that it would weaken Moscow's authority within the communist bloc. But he would never forgive Khrushchev, as he also saw deStalinisation as a challenge to his own authority, accustomed as he was to interpreting the world with himself at its centre. To diminish Stalin was to undermine Mao, who constantly compared himself to the Soviet dictator, despite bearing a long list of grievances against him. Mao also thought that he alone occupied a moral position lofty enough to impart judgement on Stalin's mistakes and achievements. An attack on Stalin, furthermore, could only play into the hands of the Americans.

Above all, the move against Stalin implied that criticism of Mao was also permissible. Khrushchev's secret speech gave ammunition to those who feared the Chairman's growing power and wanted a return to collective leadership. At the Eighth Party Congress in Beijing in September 1956, a reference to 'Mao Zedong Thought' was removed from the party constitution, the principle of collective leadership was lauded and the cult of personality was decried. Constrained by Khrushchev's secret report, Mao had little choice but to go along with these measures, to which he contributed himself in the months prior to the congress.<sup>2</sup> But the Chairman felt slighted and did not hide his anger in private.<sup>3</sup>

Mao encountered another setback when his economic policy, known as the 'Socialist High Tide', was halted in late 1956, at the second plenum of the party congress. A year earlier an impatient Mao, displeased with the slow pace of economic development, had repeatedly criticised those who favoured a more cautious tempo as 'women with bound feet'. He prophesied a leap in agricultural output brought about by the accelerated collectivisation of the countryside, and in January 1956 called for unrealistic increases in the production of grain, cotton, coal and steel. The Socialist High Tide – later referred to by some historians as the 'Little Leap Forward' – rapidly ran into trouble.<sup>4</sup> Industrial production in the cities suffered from all sorts of shortages and bottlenecks, as the required funds and raw materials for increased output were unavailable. In the countryside, collectivisation was met with widespread resistance as farmers slaughtered their animals and hid the grain. Famine appeared in some provinces by the spring of 1956. Trying to control the damage created by the shock tactics of their Chairman, premier Zhou Enlai and economic planner Chen Yun called for an end to 'rash advance' (maojin) and tried to reduce the size of collective farms, revert to a limited free market and allow greater scope for private production in the countryside. Frustrated, Mao saw this as a personal challenge. Atop a June 1956 editorial of the People's Daily criticising the Socialist High Tide for 'attempting to do all things overnight', forwarded to him for his attention, Mao angrily scrawled, 'I will not read this.' Later he wondered, 'Why should I read something that abuses me?'<sup>5</sup> His position was furthered weakened because Khrushchev, in his secret speech, had highlighted the failure of Stalin's agricultural policies, which included collectivisation of the countryside. Criticism of Stalin looked like an unintended assessment of Mao's drive towards collectivisation. The Eighth Party Congress scrapped the Socialist High Tide.

More humiliation followed after Mao, despite major reservations from other party leaders, encouraged open criticism of the party in the Hundred Flowers campaign launched in April 1957. His hope was that, by calling on ordinary people to voice their opinions, a small number of rightists and counter-revolutionaries would be uncovered. This would prevent the havoc created by deStalinisation in Hungary, where a nationwide revolt against the communist party in October 1956 had forced Soviet forces to invade the country, brutally crush all opposition and install a new government with Moscow's backing. In China, Mao explained to his reluctant colleagues, the party would break up any opposition into many small 'Hungarian incidents', all to be dealt with separately.<sup>6</sup> A more open climate, he surmised, would also help secure the support of scientists and intellectuals in developing the economy. The Chairman badly miscalculated, as the mounting barrage of criticism he had produced questioned not only the very right of the party to rule, but also his own leadership. His response was to accuse these critics of being 'bad elements' bent on destroying the party. He put Deng Xiaoping in charge of the anti-rightist campaign, which was carried out with extraordinary vehemence, targeting half a million people – many of them students and intellectuals deported to remote areas to do hard labour. Mao struggled to regain control, and the whole affair was a huge embarrassment, but his strategy was partly successful in that it created the conditions in which he could assert his own pre-eminence. Assailed from all sides, its right to rule having been called into question, the party found unity behind its Chairman.

The collapse of the Hundred Flowers campaign in June 1957 also confirmed the Chairman's suspicion that 'rightist conservatism' was the major ideological enemy, and that rightist inertia was behind the current economic stagnation. He wanted to revive the policies of the Socialist High Tide, which had been discredited by an outpouring of criticism from the very experts he had tried to court. If so many of the intellectuals who had

the professional skills and scientific knowledge to help with economic development were disaffected, it would be politically unwise to base the country's future on their expertise. This view was shared by Liu Shaoqi, the party's second-in-command, and he rallied behind the Chairman in pushing for higher targets in rural production.<sup>7</sup> In October 1957, with support from Liu, Mao had the slogan which crystallised his vision reinstated: 'Greater, Faster, Better and More Economical'. He also managed to replace the term 'rash advance' (maojin), with its connotations of reckless hurling forward, with 'leap forward' (yuejin): in the midst of a ferocious anti-rightist campaign, few party leaders dared to oppose it. Mao was having his way, and he was ready to challenge Khrushchev.





## The Bidding Starts

On 4 October 1957 a shiny steel sphere the size of a beach ball hurtled through the sky, reached its orbit and then started circling the globe at about 29,000 kilometres per hour, emitting signals that radio operators around the world picked up. Taking the United States completely by surprise, the Soviet Union had successfully launched the world's first earth satellite, opening a new chapter in the space race that was met with both awe and fear. To hurl an 84-kilo satellite into orbit, observers noted, a rocket engine as powerful as an intercontinental ballistic missile was required, which meant that the Russians could also launch atomic bombs that would reach the United States. A month later a much heavier satellite whirled overhead, carrying the first living creature to travel around the earth through space: dressed in a custom-made space suit, a little dog called Laika made history as the passenger in Sputnik II.

In a bold move, Khrushchev inaugurated an era of missile diplomacy, backed up by ceaseless propaganda from Moscow about successful experiments with intercontinental ballistic missiles. The second satellite launch was designed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, to be celebrated in Red Square in the presence of thousands of communist party leaders invited from all over the world.

Yet, despite the triumph of the satellite launches, Khrushchev was in a vulnerable position. Less than half a year earlier he had barely survived an attempted coup against him by Stalinist hardliners Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich. Marshal Zhukov, a Second World War hero who had led the final assault on Germany and captured Berlin, used army transport planes to rush key allies to Moscow in defence of his boss. But Zhukov commanded an army, and could just as well throw his tanks against Khrushchev. Ever fearful of a military coup, the Soviet leader manoeuvred to have Zhukov deposed in early November. Justifying the purge of Molotov, Malenkov and Kaganovich, now referred to as an 'anti-party group', was one thing, but how could he explain the removal of the most decorated Soviet general to his foreign guests, who were already traumatised by his secret speech and the Hungarian revolt? Josip Tito, the fiercely independent leader of Yugoslavia who refused to take orders from the Soviet Union, was another potential source of opposition that could mar the anniversary. In mid-October he objected to a Soviet draft declaration to be published at the Moscow meeting of party leaders and declined to attend the event.

Khrushchev found a key ally in Mao, despite their differences on foreign policy and ideology. Mao, in turn, had good reason to help his rival. He had badgered the Soviet leader repeatedly for assistance in acquiring nuclear weapons. Ever since the United States had started to provide military support for Taiwan, and after the Americans introduced tactical nuclear missiles in March 1955, Mao had been set on having the bomb. Now, on the eve of the international summit, Khrushchev shored up support by signing a secret agreement with China on 15 October, providing for the delivery of a Soviet atom bomb by 1959.<sup>1</sup>

Mao was ebullient. He knew that his moment had come. Khrushchev depended on him, and lavished the Chairman and his entourage with attention. Two Tu-104s were sent to fly the Chinese delegation to Moscow. The Soviet leader, flanked by some of the most senior party bosses, warmly greeted Mao at Vnukovo airport and personally escorted him to his quarters. China was the only delegation out of all sixty-four attending the conference to be housed in the Great Kremlin Palace.

Mao was put up in Empress Catherine's private quarters, which were upholstered in damask and the ceiling painted with foliate volutes. The entire west wing was extravagantly furnished, with tall columns topped by bronze capitals, walls draped in water silk or panelled in walnut, gilded stucco on vaults and thick carpets throughout. Mao seemed oblivious to it all and used his own chamber pot.<sup>2</sup>

On 7 November came the public climax of the anniversary gala: as Mao stood next to Khrushchev on top of the Lenin mausoleum to review the four-hour parade through Red Square, the Soviet armed forces showed off their new weapons. People waved Chinese flags and shouted 'Long live Mao and China!'

Despite all the privileges accorded Mao, he enjoyed carping about his hosts. He disparaged the food and was scornful of Russian culture, condescending to other party delegates and aloof with Khrushchev. 'Look at how differently they're treating us now,' he quipped to his doctor with a smile of disdain. 'Even in this communist land, they know who is powerful and who is weak. What snobs!'<sup>3</sup>

But he delivered the crucial support on which Khrushchev counted. On 14 November, in front of all party delegates, he pronounced: 'We are so many people here, with so many parties, we must have a head . . . If the Soviet Union is not the head, then who is? Should we do it by alphabetical order? Albania? Vietnam with comrade Ho Chi Minh? Another country? China does not qualify to be the head, we do not have enough experience. We know about revolution, but not about socialist construction. Demographically we are a huge country, but economically we are small.'<sup>4</sup>

But if Mao gave his showpiece pledge of allegiance, he had also come to Moscow to show that he, rather than Khrushchev, was the true senior eminence of the communist camp. He missed few opportunities to diminish the Soviet leader, even telling him to his face that he had a bad temper which offended people.<sup>5</sup> Two days later, on 18 November, came the moment he had been anticipating. Brushing aside the conference protocol with an impromptu speech, Mao addressed the delegates from his seat, invoking his poor health for his refusal to stand up. As Khrushchev later recollected in his memoirs, Mao thought himself a cut above the rest.<sup>6</sup> In a long and rambling monologue, the Chairman turned to Khrushchev, offering him advice as if speaking to a pupil: 'No matter who, everyone needs support . . . There is a Chinese saying that while there is beauty in a lotus it needs the support of its green leaves. You, comrade Khrushchev, even though you are a lotus, you too need to be supported by leaves.' As if this was not cryptic enough, Mao then declared that the showdown between Khrushchev and the Stalinist hardliners in June 1957 had been a 'struggle between two lines: one was erroneous and the other relatively correct'. Was this to be understood as faint praise or as a veiled barb? It was certainly lost on the translator, who muttered something vague about 'two different groups' in which one 'tendency led by Khrushchev won the day'. What exactly Mao said, the Yugoslav ambassador later recollected, 'nobody except the Chinese knew', but it produced a deathly silence.<sup>7</sup> Further embarrassing his host, Mao then went on to describe Molotov, one of the chief plotters of the June coup, as 'an old comrade with a long history of struggle'.<sup>8</sup>

The core of Mao's speech was more frightening to his Russian hosts. 'There are two winds in the world, an east wind and a west wind. We have a saying in China that if the east wind does not prevail over the west wind, then the west wind prevails over the east wind. I think that the key point of the international situation right now is that the east wind prevails over the west wind, that is to say that the forces of socialism have become overwhelmingly superior to the forces of capitalism.'

Mao continued with a review of the changing balance of power between the two camps, and then shocked party delegates with his musings about an impending world war.<sup>9</sup> 'Let us imagine how many people would die if war breaks out. There are 2.7 billion people in the world, and a third could be lost. If it is a little higher it could be half . . . I say that if the worst came to the worst and one-half dies, there will still be one-half left, but imperialism would be erased and the whole world would become socialist. After a few years there would be 2.7 billion people again.'<sup>10</sup> The United States was nothing but a 'paper tiger', Mao continued, seemingly immune to the loss of life he was contemplating. He was bluffing, on this occasion and on others like it, but the point of all the sabre-rattling was to show that he, not Khrushchev, was a more determined revolutionary.

Mao not only totted up population figures for his audience. For some time, he had been carefully following Khrushchev's push for a decentralisation of the economy and his undermining of desk-bound bureaucrats in Moscow in order to transfer power instead to new economic regional councils supervised by his own local henchmen. Khrushchev had criss-crossed the countryside lecturing peasants on how to increase agricultural yields: 'You must plant potatoes in square clusters. You must grow cabbage as my grandmother did.'<sup>11</sup> He was scathing about economists with fancy pedigrees who were 'arithmetically' correct but failed to understand what the Soviet people were capable of: 'Let the ideologists of the capitalist world go on prattling for too long a time. Let the comrade economists blush. Sometimes man must exceed his own strength by making a sudden spurt.'<sup>12</sup> And that sudden spurt, created by freeing the farmers from the dead hand of the Stalinist state, would create such abundance that even the United States would be overtaken economically: when 'people come to know their own strength, they create miracles'. In May 1957 Khrushchev had crowed that within the next few years the Soviet Union would catch up with the United States in per-capita production of meat, milk and butter.<sup>13</sup> Now, in Moscow, in front of foreign party delegates, Khrushchev proclaimed the success of his economic drive in his keynote address to celebrate the October Anniversary: 'Comrades, the calculations of our planners show that, within the next fifteen years, the Soviet Union will be able not only to catch up with but also to surpass the present volume of output of important products in the USA.'<sup>14</sup>

Mao wasted no time. He publicly took up the challenge and immediately announced that China would outstrip



Britain – then still considered a major industrial power – within fifteen years: ‘This year our country has 5.2 million tonnes of steel, and after five years we can have 10 to 15 million tonnes; after a further five years 20 to 25 million tonnes, then add five more years and we will have 30 to 40 million tonnes. Maybe I am bragging here, and maybe when we have another international meeting in future you will criticise me for being subjective, but I speak on the strength of considerable evidence . . . Comrade Khrushchev tells us that the Soviet Union will overtake the United States in fifteen years. I can tell you that in fifteen years we may well catch up with or overtake Britain.’<sup>15</sup> The Great Leap Forward had begun.



## Purging the Ranks

In Moscow, Khrushchev had provided Mao with the ammunition to charge ahead. Not only had the sputnik demonstrated the ability of the relatively backward Soviet Union to take a lead over an economically advanced nation like the United States, but Soviet planners themselves were preparing a major economic drive similar to the Socialist High Tide the Chairman had been forced to abandon.

Back in Beijing, less than two weeks after his return from the Soviet Union, Mao secured the backing of senior vice-chairman Liu Shaoqi for a leap forward. A frugal and taciturn man, tall but slightly stooped with greying hair, Liu had dedicated his career to the party line, regularly toiling away through the night. He also saw himself as the Chairman's successor, a position he believed would come to him as a reward for years of hard and selfless work. A few months earlier Mao himself had indicated his intention of stepping down from the post of head of state, and may even have privately assured Liu that he supported him in his role as heir apparent.<sup>1</sup> Liu embraced Mao's vision: 'In fifteen years, the Soviet Union can catch up with and surpass the United States in the output of the most important industrial and agricultural products. In the same period of time, we ought to catch up with and overtake Britain in the output of iron, steel and other major industrial products.'<sup>2</sup> Before the end of the year press articles heralding great advances in water conservancy, grain production and steel output appeared all over the country. On New Year's day in 1958 the People's Daily published an editorial approved by Liu Shaoqi which captured the leader's vision: 'Go All Out and Aim High'.<sup>3</sup>

Li Fuchun, a bookish man with a self-effacing air who as head of the State Planning Commission regularly sent blueprints as thick as a telephone book to each province, detailing how much of each product should be produced, also lent his support to Mao. A fellow Hunanese and childhood acquaintance of the Chairman, a veteran of the Long March, Li was the first among the economic planners to jump on to the bandwagon of the Great Leap Forward, whether out of fear, conviction or ambition. He joined Liu Shaoqi in praising Mao's bold vision.<sup>4</sup>

Under the drumbeat of propaganda, and goaded and coaxed by Mao in private meetings and party conferences, provincial leaders threw their weight behind his go-all-out campaign, promising higher targets in a whole range of economic activities. At a small gathering of party bosses in Hangzhou in early January 1958, Ke Qingshi, a tall man with a bouffant haircut who was mayor of Shanghai and lived in genuine awe of the Chairman, enthused about the 'new high tide in socialist construction', proposing that the country 'ride the wind and break the waves' by relying on the great masses.<sup>5</sup> Surrounded by supporters, and energised by Ke Qingshi, Mao was no longer able to contain the anger pent up over several years, exploding in the face of Bo Yibo, one of the chief economic planners who had resisted his vision. Bo was a veteran revolutionary, but one of his concerns was to keep a balanced budget. 'I will not listen to that stuff of yours!' Mao yelled. 'What are you talking about? For the past few years I have stopped reading the budgets, but you just force me to sign off on them anyway.' Then he turned to Zhou Enlai: 'The preface to my book The Socialist Upsurge in the Countryside has had a tremendous influence on the entire country. Is that a "cult of personality" or "idolatry"? Regardless, newspapers and magazines all over the country have reprinted it, and it's had a huge impact. So now I have really become the "arch criminal of rash advance!"'<sup>6</sup> The moment had come to crack the whip and herd the planners on to the road to utopia.

Situated in the extreme south of the country, Nanning is known as the 'green city' because of its lush, subtropical climate, mild enough for sweet peach, betel nut and palm trees to thrive all the year round. With citrus trees in blossom and a balmy temperature of 25 degrees Celsius in the middle of January, the setting should have provided some relief for party leaders coming from wintry Beijing, but the atmosphere was tense. As Zhang Zhongliang, the zealous leader of Gansu province, enthused, 'From start to finish the Chairman criticised rightist conservative thinking!'<sup>7</sup> Mao set the tone on the opening day of the meeting: 'Don't mention this term "opposition to rash advance" again, all right? This is a political problem. Any opposition would lead to

disappointment, and 600 million discouraged people would be a disaster.<sup>8</sup>

Over several days Mao repeatedly lost his temper as he badgered the planners, accusing them of 'pouring cold water on the enthusiasm of the people' and holding back the country. Those guilty of opposing 'rash advance' were a mere 'fifty metres away from the rightists'. Wu Lengxi, editor of the People's Daily which had published the critical editorial on 20 June 1956, was at the very top of the list of leaders summoned by Mao. The Chairman's verdict: 'Vulgar Marxism, vulgar dialectics. The article seems to be anti-leftist as well as anti-rightist, but in fact it is not anti-rightist at all but exclusively anti-leftist. It is sharply pointed against me.'<sup>9</sup>

Huge pressure was applied to the assembled leaders, and even for hardened men accustomed to the rigours of party life the stress was soon to prove too much. Huang Jing, chairman of a commission responsible for technological development and former husband of Mao's wife, collapsed after the Chairman took him to task. Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and mumbling incomprehensibly, he gave the doctor a bewildered look, begging for forgiveness: 'Save me, save me!' Put on a plane for medical treatment, he fell to his knees to kowtow before Li Fuchun, who was accompanying him to Guangzhou. Placed in a military hospital, he jumped through a window and broke a leg. He died in November 1958 aged forty-seven.<sup>10</sup>

But the real target for Mao's ire was Zhou Enlai. On 16 January Mao brandished in front of the premier a copy of Ke Qingshi's 'The New Shanghai Rides the Wind and Breaks the Waves, Accelerating the Construction of Socialism'. 'Well, Enlai, you are the premier, do you think you could write anything as good?' he asked scornfully. 'I couldn't,' the premier muttered, straining to absorb the attack. Then, after the ritual of public humiliation, came the blow: 'Aren't you opposed to "rash advance"? Well, I am opposed to opposition to "rash advance"!'<sup>11</sup> A number of leftist party leaders joined the fray. Ke Qingshi and Li Jingquan, the radical leader of Sichuan, tore into the premier.<sup>12</sup> Three days later Zhou made a lengthy speech of self-criticism, taking full responsibility for the reversal in 1956, admitting that it was the result of 'rightist conservative thinking' and accepting that he had deviated from the Chairman's guiding policy. Mao's notion that mistakes made by the party should not be overemphasised, being only 'one finger out of ten', was enshrined in the meeting's manifesto, thus marginalising those who had attacked the Little Leap Forward.<sup>13</sup>

Zhou Enlai, whose suave, soft-spoken, slightly effeminate manners made him the ideal choice as China's foreign emissary, had a talent for landing right side up. He could be all modesty and humility when required. Before the communist victory the nationalists used to call him Budaoweng, the Chinese name for the weighted toy tumbler that always lands upright.<sup>14</sup> Early in his career as a revolutionary, Zhou had resolved never to challenge Mao. His decision was made after both had clashed in an incident that had left Mao seething with resentment. At a conference in 1932, critics of guerrilla warfare had ripped into Mao and handed command over the battlefield to Zhou instead. The result was a disaster, as a few years later nationalist troops mauled the Red Army, forcing the communists on the Long March away from their base areas. In 1943, as Zhou realised that Mao's authority had become supreme, he proclaimed his undying support to the Chairman: 'The direction and leadership of Mao Zedong', he declared, 'is the direction of the Chinese Communist Party!' But Mao did not let him off the hook so easily. Zhou's loyalty was tested in a series of self-criticism meetings in which he had to admit to his political crimes, labelling himself a 'political swindler' who lacked principles. It was a gruelling experience in self-abasement, but one from which Zhou emerged as the Chairman's faithful assistant. From here onwards an uneasy and paradoxical alliance developed. Mao had to keep Zhou at bay as a potential contender for power; on the other hand he needed him to run the show. Mao lacked interest in matters of daily routine and organisational detail, and he was often abrasive with other people. Zhou was a first-rate administrator with a knack for organisation, a smooth operator skilled at forging party unity. As one biographer puts it, Mao 'had to draw Zhou close even as he raised the whip, and sometimes lashed the man he could not live without'.<sup>15</sup>

The whipping did not stop at Nanning. Two months later, in Chengdu, the final days of a party gathering were devoted to rectification seminars. But first Mao spewed disdain on the blind faith with which the planners had been following Stalin's economic path: a heavy emphasis on large industrial complexes, a sprawling apparatus of bureaucrats and a chronically underdeveloped countryside. As early as November 1956 he had lambasted some of his colleagues for 'uncritically thinking that everything in the Soviet Union is perfect, that even their farts are fragrant'.<sup>16</sup> Creative thinking was needed to find China's own path to communism, rather than rigid adherence to Soviet methods, now frozen into socialist dogma. China should 'walk on two legs', simultaneously developing industry and agriculture, tackling heavy as well as light industry. And Mao, as the leader on that

road, now demanded full allegiance. 'What is wrong with worship? The truth is in our hands, why should we not worship it? . . . Each group must worship its leader, it cannot but worship its leader,' Mao explained; this was the 'correct cult of personality'.<sup>17</sup> The message was immediately picked up by Ke Qingshi, who quivered enthusiastically: 'We must have blind faith in the Chairman! We must obey the Chairman with total abandon!'<sup>18</sup>

Having consecrated his own cult of personality, Mao handed over the proceedings to Liu Shaoqi, his political crony. While virtually all the participants offered self-criticisms, the situation must have been agonising for Zhou. Both men were intensely competitive, and Liu may have seen Zhou as a threat to his prospects of taking over from the Chairman.<sup>19</sup> That day Liu outdid Zhou in adulation of the leader: 'Over the years I have felt Chairman Mao's superiority. I am unable to keep up with his thought. Chairman Mao has a remarkable knowledge, especially of Chinese history, which no one else in the party can reach. [He] has practical experience, especially in combining Marxist theory and Chinese reality. Chairman Mao's superiority in these aspects is something we should admire and try to learn from.'<sup>20</sup> Zhou, for his part, felt intense pressure to appease the Chairman, who had stripped him of his authority in economic planning after Nanning. Again, he submitted a long confession about his errors, but his offerings failed to impress Mao.

In May, at a formal party gathering of over 1,300 people, Zhou Enlai and the party's economics tsar Chen Yun were summoned to prepare yet another self-examination. No longer knowing what would satisfy Mao, Zhou spent days in self-imposed isolation, struggling to find the right turn of phrase. After a telephone conversation with Chen Yun, who was in a similar predicament, he sank into such dejection that his mind simply went blank. All he could do was mumble a few words followed by long silences as he stared at his secretary. That evening late at night his wife found him sitting slumped at his desk. Trying to help, the secretary pencilled in a passage about Zhou and Mao having 'shared the boat through many storms'. When Zhou later pored over the document, he angrily rebuked the secretary, tears welling in his eyes, accusing the man of knowing too little about party history.<sup>21</sup> In the end Zhou grovelled, lavishing praise on the Chairman in front of the assembled party leaders and telling the audience that Mao was the 'personification of truth' and that mistakes occurred only when the party became divorced from his great leadership. A few days after this display, Zhou handed Mao a personal letter promising to study his writings earnestly and to follow all his directives. The Chairman was finally satisfied. He declared Zhou and the others to be good comrades. Zhou had saved his job.

During these first months of the Great Leap Forward, Zhou was repeatedly humiliated and demeaned, but he never withdrew his support, choosing instead quietly to accept the Chairman's blistering outburst in Nanning. Zhou Enlai did not have the power to overthrow his master, but he did have the planners behind him, and he could have stepped back – at the cost of his career. But he had learned to accept humiliation at the hands of the Chairman as a way of staying in power, albeit in his colleague's shadow. Zhou was loyal to Mao, and as a result the many skills of the servant went to abet his master.<sup>22</sup> Mao Zedong was the visionary, Zhou Enlai the midwife who transformed nightmares into reality. Always on probation, he would work tirelessly at the Great Leap Forward to prove himself.

As Zhou Enlai was debased in a spectacle of power and humiliation, other top economic officials quickly fell in line. Li Fuchun, chair of the State Planning Commission, never had to resort to self-criticism, having broken ranks with the other planners by rallying round Mao's slogans in December 1957. Chen Yun made several self-critical statements. Li Xiannian, minister of finance, and Bo Yibo, chair of the State Economic Commission, both opponents of the Little Leap Forward in 1956, now realised that they could not resist the tide. None dared to disagree. Li Fuchun and Li Xiannian were enlisted in the secretariat, the inner core of the party, after they had proclaimed their allegiance to Mao.

To increase the political pressure on the top echelon, the Chairman also presided over a shift in power from the centre to the provinces. Nanning was the first in a series of impromptu conferences called by Mao, who strictly controlled the list of participants, set the agendas and dominated the proceedings, allowing him to cajole his followers towards the Great Leap Forward. He brought the secretariat to the provinces, rather than summon the provinces to come to the more formal sessions of established bodies like the State Council in Beijing.<sup>23</sup> By so doing he tapped into a deep current of dissatisfaction among provincial leaders. Tao Lujia, first secretary of Shanxi, spoke for many local cadres when he expressed his impatience with the country's widespread poverty.<sup>24</sup> Mao's vision of a China which was 'poor and blank' resonated with idealists who believed in the party's capacity to catapult the country ahead of its rivals. 'When you are poor you are inclined to be

revolutionary. Blank paper is ideal for writing.’<sup>25</sup> Radical provincial leaders lapped up their leader’s vision. Wu Zhipu, leader of Henan, heralded a ‘continuous revolution’ to crush rightist opponents and leap forward. Zeng Xisheng, long-term veteran of the People’s Liberation Army and leader of Anhui, provided the slogan ‘Battle Hard for Three Years to Change the Face of China’. But most of all, having witnessed the ritual abasement of their superiors on their own turf, the provinces were encouraged to launch their own witch-hunts, as a wind of persecution blew through the country.

Mao could be cryptic, leaving his colleagues guessing at the nature of his message, but this time there was plenty of pressure from Beijing concerning the right direction. To make sure that the purges against rightist elements were carried out thoroughly, Mao sent his bull terrier Deng Xiaoping to a series of regional meetings. Instructions were clear. In Gansu, Deng explained, the struggle against vice-governors Sun Diancai, Chen Chengyi and Liang Dajun had to be unequivocal.<sup>26</sup> Gansu boss Zhang Zhongliang wasted no time, and a few weeks later he announced that an anti-party clique had been uncovered inside the party provincial committee. Coincidentally, its leaders were Sun Diancai, Chen Chengyi and Liang Dajun: they were accused of denying the achievements of the Socialist High Tide in 1956, attacking the party, denigrating socialism and promoting capitalism – among other heinous crimes.<sup>27</sup>

These were powerful leaders toppled with the support of Beijing. The purges, however, were carried out at all levels of the party, silencing most critical voices. Few dared to oppose the party line. In parts of Gansu, a poor province near the deserts of Inner Mongolia, any critical comment about grain procurement or excessive quotas simply became unthinkable. The message to party members concerned about the crop was blunt: ‘You should consider carefully whether or not you are rightists.’<sup>28</sup> In Lanzhou University, located in the capital city of Gansu, up to half of all students were given a white flag, the sign of a politically conservative laggard. Some had a note pinned on their back: ‘Your father is a white flag.’ Others were beaten. Those who took a neutral stand were denounced as reactionaries.<sup>29</sup> The purge continued for as long as Zhang Zhongliang remained in power. By March 1960, some 190,000 people had been denounced and humiliated in public meetings, and 40,000 cadres were expelled from the party, including 150 top provincial officials.<sup>30</sup>

Similar purges took place throughout the country, as radical leaders seized the opportunity to get rid of their more timorous rivals. From December 1957 onwards, the southern province of Yunnan was in the grip of an anti-rightist purge that reached from party seniors down to village cadres. In April 1958 the tough local boss Xie Fuzhi, a short man with a double chin, announced the overthrow of the leaders of an ‘anti-party clique’: Zheng Dun and Wang Jing, the heads of the Organisation Department, were guilty of ‘localism’, ‘revisionism’, advocating capitalism, attempting to overthrow the party’s leadership and opposing the socialist revolution.<sup>31</sup> By the summer of 1958 the inquisition had resulted in the removal of some 2,000 party members. One in fifteen top leaders were fired, including more than 150 powerful cadres working at the county level or higher up in one of the province’s dozen administrative regions. A further 9,000 party members were labelled as rightists as the campaign unfolded.<sup>32</sup>

‘Anti-party’ cliques were uncovered almost everywhere. Mao prodded the provincial leaders on. ‘Better me than you as dictator,’ he declared in March 1958, invoking words from Lenin. ‘It’s similar in the provinces: is it going to be Jiang Hua or Sha Wenhan as dictator?’<sup>33</sup> In Zhejiang Sha Wenhan was hounded by Jiang Hua, and similar battles took place in Guangdong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, Anhui, Liaoning, Hebei and Yunnan, among other provinces.<sup>34</sup> In Henan, one of the provinces that would be most affected by famine, a moderate leader called Pan Fusheng was swept aside by Wu Zhipu, a zealous follower of Mao. Pan had painted a grim picture of collectivisation during the Socialist High Tide. ‘The peasants . . . are the same as beasts of burden today. Yellow oxen are tied up in the house and human beings are harnessed in the field. Girls and women pull ploughs and harrows, with their wombs hanging out. Co-operation is transformed into the exploitation of human strength.’<sup>35</sup> Here, it seemed, was a blatant case of a retreat to capitalism, and all of Pan’s followers were hunted down, dividing party and village. Scarecrows with slogans appeared along dusty roadsides, reading ‘Down with Pan Fusheng’ or ‘Down with Wu Zhipu’. Most local cadres could see which way the wind was blowing, and fell in line behind Wu Zhipu.<sup>36</sup>

But, however great the pressure, there were always choices to be made. When Mao toured Jiangsu and asked the local leader whether they were fighting the rightists, Jiang Weiqing gathered up his courage and told the Chairman that if there were any bad elements he would have to be counted as their leader. The party should



get rid of him first. Mao laughed: 'You don't fear being cut in pieces for pulling the emperor off his horse! Well, just leave it then . . .'<sup>37</sup> As a result, fewer cadres were denounced in Jiangsu than elsewhere.

But rare were those who had the conviction, the courage or the inclination to swim against the tide. The purges percolated down the ranks of the party. Just as Mao imposed his will in Beijing, local overlords laid down the law in their own provinces, denouncing any opposition as 'conservative rightism'. And just as provincial capitals had their hegemons, county leaders and their cronies used the purge to eliminate their rivals. They turned a blind eye on local bullies. On the ground, a world far removed from the utopia envisaged on paper started to emerge.

An early warning sign came in the summer of 1958, as a report circulating among the top brass showed how violence had become the norm during the anti-rightist campaign in Fengxian county, just south of Shanghai. A hundred people committed suicide, many others being worked to death in the fields. Wang Wenzhong, county leader, set the example with a motto that compared 'the masses' to dogs intimidated only by the sight of a stick in a cadre's hands. Thousands of villagers were accused of being 'landlords' or 'counter-revolutionaries' in public meetings that punctuated daily life for months on end. Many were routinely beaten, tied up and tortured, some being carried away to special labour camps set up throughout the county.<sup>38</sup>

Fengxian was a dire warning of the darkness to come. At the top, however, floating far above the ground, faith in the ability of the people to change heaven and earth was boundless. In December 1957 Chen Zhengren, one of Mao's most trusted colleagues, attacked the conservatism of 'rightists' who hampered the enthusiasm of the masses in the water-conservancy campaign. This was the rallying cry of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>39</sup>

**CHART OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MASONIC EMBLEMS**

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## Bugle Call

A muddy river runs through the heart of China, flowing some 5,500 kilometres from the barren mountains in Qinghai to empty in the Bohai Sea, the innermost gulf of the Yellow Sea near Beijing. The upper reaches of the river flow through mountain valleys where the water is clear, but after a series of steep cliffs and gorges it meanders through the dusty loess plateau, picking up the soft, silty sediment left behind over time by wind storms. As mud and sand are further discharged into the river, it turns into a dirty ochre colour. The loess is deposited in the slower sections downstream, causing the river bed to rise. By the time it passes the ancient city of Kaifeng, the river bed runs ten metres above the surrounding fields. When the banks burst, the flat, northern plain is easily inundated, turning the river into one of the most perilous natural hazards on record. Kaifeng itself was flooded, abandoned and rebuilt several times. Ditches and embankments were traditionally used as flood defences but they had little effect, the river carrying an estimated 1.6 billion tonnes of silt annually. 'When the Yellow River flows clear', in Chinese, is the equivalent of the expression 'when pigs fly'.

Another traditional saying heralds the advent of a miraculous leader: 'When a great man emerges, the Yellow River will run clear.' Could Chairman Mao tame the river that flooded so often that it had earned the name 'China's sorrow'? Early propaganda posters showed him sitting pensively on a rock overlooking the river, perhaps pondering ways to clear the water.<sup>1</sup> In 1952, when these photos were taken, Mao had toured the river and uttered a single, somewhat cryptic line: 'Work on the Yellow River must be carried out well.'<sup>2</sup> Heated debates about the scheme ensued among engineers while Mao remained on the sidelines, and a faction in favour of a large dam finally prevailed. Soviet experts, themselves enamoured with gigantic projects, surveyed the lower reach and identified the Three Gate Gorge in Henan as a suitable site. A design for a dam setting the normal pool water at 360 metres was delivered in April 1956, meaning that close to a million people would have to be relocated as some 220,000 hectares of land would be submerged. The project was officially launched in April 1957, despite the reservations of several hydraulic engineers. Huang Wanli, an American-trained geologist who had visited every major dam in the United States, argued that dire consequences would follow from the attempt to clear the river of sediment. Blocking dirt and loess behind a giant dam would limit the reservoir's lifespan and eventually lead to disaster. Then Mao intervened. 'What is this trash?' was the angry headline of his editorial published in June 1957 by the People's Daily. The article listed a series of charges against Huang, alleging, among other things, that he had attacked the Chairman, harmed the party, propagated bourgeois democracy and admired foreign cultures.<sup>3</sup> All criticism of the Three Gate Gorge Dam was brushed aside.

By the end of 1958 the Yellow River was blocked. Some 6 million square metres of earth had been moved in a pharaonic enterprise involving the labour of tens of thousands of villagers. A year later the dam was ready. The water was clear. But the initial design had provided for several outlets and tubes, allowing accumulated sediment to be flushed through the dam. These had been blocked by reinforced concrete in the haste to complete the project on schedule. Within a year the sediment started inching upstream, raising the waters and threatening to flood the industrial centre of Xi'an. Extensive rebuilding was required to purge the sediment, which in turn caused a drop in the pool level. With a lower waterline the 150,000 kilowatt turbines, installed at great cost, became completely useless and had to be removed to another site. The water was no longer clear. By 1961 the amount of silt carried by the Yellow River had doubled, Zhou Enlai himself admitted. Up to 95 per cent of a section of the Yellow River west of Zhengzhou consisted of mud.<sup>4</sup> A few years later the area was so silted up that foreigners were banned from visiting the dam.<sup>5</sup>

The term 'Great Leap Forward' was first used in the context of the water-conservancy drive launched towards the end of 1957. Determined to overtake Britain in fifteen years, Mao saw a key to rapid industrialisation in the substitution of labour for capital. The masses were the country's real wealth, and they should be mobilised during the slack winter season, before the spring ploughing, to transform the countryside. If water could be diverted to irrigate the thin topsoil of the many impoverished villages strewn across the arid north, if floods could be contained with giant dykes and reservoirs in the subtropical south, the yield of grain would jump. All



over China tens of millions of farmers joined irrigation projects: collectively, so the propaganda went, they could accomplish in a matter of months what their forefathers had done in thousands of years. Some 30 million people were recruited in October 1957. By January one in six people was digging earth in China. More than 580 million cubic metres of rocks and soil were moved before the end of the year.<sup>6</sup> Henan, where the Three Gate Gorge Dam was being built, took the lead, as local boss Wu Zhipu ruthlessly pushed the labour force into grandiose projects designed to impress Beijing. In the region bordering Henan and Anhui, centre of an ambitious 'Harness the Huai River' campaign which would unfold for several decades, more than a hundred dams and reservoirs were built between 1957 and 1959.<sup>7</sup>

In a country in the grip of gigantism, massive irrigation schemes appeared everywhere, although the leadership gave special emphasis to the north-west. Critical voices were few and far between. Mao distrusted intellectuals, and in the summer of 1957 persecuted hundreds of thousands of those who had dared to voice a critical opinion during the Hundred Flowers. But as we have seen in the previous chapter, the purge of party leaders in the anti-rightist campaign from late 1957 onwards was even more effective in removing opposition to the Great Leap Forward.

In Gansu province, for instance, senior leaders such as Sun Diancai and Liang Dajun were denounced as the heads of an 'anti-party' clique and expelled in February 1958. One of the accusations levelled against them was that they had expressed doubts about the speed and extent of the water-conservancy movement: for every 50,000 hectares of irrigated land, they had claimed, a hundred villagers paid with their lives. Their removal from power allowed local boss Zhang Zhongliang to take the lead and respond to the call from Beijing. Some 3.4 million farmers, close to 70 per cent of the Gansu workforce, were deployed on irrigation projects that cut across one of the country's most arid provinces. Many of the villagers were made to build small dams and reservoirs, but these were not enough to satisfy the leadership. Zhang Zhongliang had a more daring vision of the future, one in which a large water highway would tunnel through snow-capped mountains and span deep valleys to provide water to the central and western regions of the province. The Tao River, quite literally, would 'move up the mountains', as it was diverted up the hills before flowing 900 kilometres from the Jiudian Gorges to Qingyang.<sup>8</sup> As clean drinking water would be brought to parched villages across the province, Gansu would be turned into a giant park as lush and green as the Summer Palace in Beijing.<sup>9</sup>

Work started in June 1958, and attracted support from the country's leadership. In September 1958 Marshal Zhu De used his calligraphy to signal the momentous nature of the project. The inscription read: 'Raising the Tao River up the mountains is a pioneering undertaking by the people of Gansu in transforming nature.'<sup>10</sup> But the project was bedevilled by problems from the start. Soil erosion caused frequent landslides, reservoirs filled with silt, rivers turned to mud.<sup>11</sup> Villagers enlisted on the project had to dig caves in the mountains for shelter in the freezing cold of winter, foraging for herbs to supplement a meagre diet of grain.<sup>12</sup> By the summer of 1961 work came to a halt, and in March 1962 the project was abandoned altogether. Total irrigated surface: zero hectares. Cost to the state: 150 million yuan. Number of work days: 600,000. Cost to the people: inestimable. At its peak some 160,000 people had been made to work on the project, and most of these were villagers diverted away from agricultural work. At least 2,400 died, some in accidents, but many more as a result of a brutal regime which forced workers to slave day and night in order to reach ever higher targets.<sup>13</sup> Such was the frenzy with which cadres pushed villagers that Tongwei, an impoverished county in the mountains situated at the heart of the project, would have one of the highest death rates in the country: slow starvation and widespread physical punishment changed this desolate place into a site of horror.

Targets in water conservancy were measured by the number of tonnes of earth a province could move. This magic number – entirely unrelated to the actual usefulness of the projects being undertaken – was then compared nationwide in a spirit of emulation which determined the political clout of a province. Liu Derun, deputy director of the Office of Water Conservancy established specifically to supervise the campaign, later recalled that 'Our daily work consisted of making phone calls to the provinces inquiring about the number of projects they were building, how many people were involved, and how much earth they had moved. With hindsight, some of the data and figures we gathered were obvious exaggerations, but no one back then had the energy to check them out.'<sup>14</sup>

In this campaign the tone was set by Beijing, and in the capital Mao made sure that everybody got involved. Some thirty kilometres north of Beijing, in a serene and sparsely populated valley, defended from the northern

winds by several hills, many of the Ming emperors and their wives lay buried in their underground mausoleums. Protected by statues of elephants, camels, horses, unicorns and other mythical beasts, which in turn were followed by human sculptures in a funeral cortège, these emperors were now accused of having built vast palaces for themselves while their subjects were exposed to the torrents rushing down from the bare slopes of the mountains. In January 1958 the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army started work on a reservoir near the tombs. By damming a river in the valley, a regular supply of water would help the people. Shock troops were provided by the army. Work proceeded around the clock, manpower being furnished by factories and institutions from the capital, while the press and the radio brought constant coverage to the public.

The Ming Tombs Reservoir was to be the flagship of the Great Leap Forward, an example to be emulated by the rest of the country. Soon tens of thousands of 'volunteers' from the capital joined the effort, including students, cadres and even foreign diplomats. Work went on in all weathers and proceeded at night by the light of torches, lanterns and pressure lamps. Hardly any machinery was used: the people who turned up were given picks, shovels, baskets and poles to dump the rubble in railway wagons, which were shuttled to the dam where it was ground into gravel. Hewn stone was lifted by block and tackle. Then, on 25 May 1958, Mao appeared in front of the crowds and posed for the photographers with a bamboo pole slung across his shoulders, two buckets filled with earth dangling from the pole.<sup>15</sup> The photos appeared on the front page of every newspaper, galvanising a nation.

Jan Rowinski, a young student from Poland, participated in the building of this reservoir. He and other volunteers were given a pole with two baskets which they filled with rubble, working their way around the track with straw hats for protection against the summer sun. The workers were divided into units of ten with an overseer who reported to a group of a hundred, who in turn answered to the next man up the chain of command. Everybody slept in tents put up by the military or in peasant huts, with banners proclaiming that 'Three Years of Hard Work is Ten Thousand Years of Happiness'. Rowinski was quick to realise that the emperors, denounced for exploiting the common people, had probably used similar tactics to build the Great Wall, the Imperial Canal and the Ming Tombs – fusing tens of thousands of labourers armed with nothing but a bamboo pole into a docile but efficient workforce.<sup>16</sup>

Mikhail Klochko, a foreign adviser who had volunteered to help, was also sceptical, noting that the few spadefuls of earth he had shovelled around had little propaganda value, although it did provide a welcome opportunity for hundreds of workers to take a few minutes' rest as they gathered around and gawked at the foreigner digging. Most of the work was disorganised, and a few hundred men with excavators and lorries would have done a more efficient job than the thousands of workers compelled to participate, all having to be transported, billeted and fed for weeks on end.<sup>17</sup>

The haste with which the project was executed resulted in major miscalculations, and in April 1958 leaks appeared in the reservoir. A Polish expert on soil solidification was flown in from Gdansk to freeze the ground, preventing the water from escaping. At long last, the dam was formally opened with a brass band and officiating dignitaries praising Mao and paying tribute to the voluntary workers.<sup>18</sup> As the reservoir was built in the wrong location, it dried up and was abandoned after a few years.

Work at the Ming Tombs may have been an exciting event for some foreign students, but most people dreaded the back-breaking work. Mao himself started perspiring after half an hour of digging in the sun, his face turning bright red. 'So little effort and already I'm dripping with sweat,' he said, before retiring to the command tent for some rest.<sup>19</sup> His immediate entourage – secretaries, bodyguards and private doctor – were also sent to the reservoir by Mao. 'Just work until you are exhausted. If you really can't stand it, just let me know.' Group One, as they were known, remained a privileged elite, sleeping on quilts on the floor of a classroom when everybody else spent the night on reed mats outdoors. They were also spared the scorching heat of early summer, being assigned a night shift by the general in charge. Li Zhisui, Mao's personal doctor, was healthy and still young at thirty-eight years of age, but the digging and carrying was the most arduous work he had ever done in his life. After two weeks he was exhausted, aching in every limb and trembling with cold at night; every reserve of energy in his body had been used up. Nobody in Group One wanted to continue, not even the strong bodyguards, but who would want to be labelled a backward element by suggesting that they quit? Mercifully, they were ordered back to Zhongnanhai.<sup>20</sup>

But outside the capital the pressure was much greater, and villagers were the ones who bore the brunt of the

campaign: they were not called off after a mere two weeks of work to return to the luxuries of an elite cadre lifestyle. They were marched off in groups to construction sites far away from home and family, made to perform exhausting labour all day long for months on end, sometimes throughout the night without any rest, poorly fed and barely clothed, and exposed to the elements, come snow, rain or heat.

Yunnan provides a good example of what happened far away from the glare of publicity. Some villages in the subtropical province started work on reservoirs in the winter of 1957–8, but the local party boss was unimpressed. In early January 1958 Xie Fuzhi, the man who a few months later so ruthlessly purged his colleagues in the anti-rightist movement, complained loudly that far too many farmers were laggards who failed to perform their collective duties in the slack winter months. Eight hours of work a day was a strict minimum for every adult, while the amount of food consumed by workers on irrigation projects should be curtailed.<sup>21</sup> Then, on 15 January, the People's Daily listed Yunnan as one of the worst performers in the water-conservancy campaign.<sup>22</sup> Determined to catch up, Xie called an emergency meeting the following day. Up to half the workforce in the province should join the movement, he commanded, and villagers were to work for up to ten hours a day, through the night if necessary. Shirkers should be punished, and targets should be met at any cost. Cadres who failed to comply would be sacked.<sup>23</sup> Coming in the midst of an unfolding anti-rightist campaign which had already stripped thousands of local cadres of their jobs, this was no idle threat. Results followed promptly. On 19 January the People's Daily reported that Yunnan, singled out only a few days earlier, now had 2.5 million people, a third of the workforce, moving earth.<sup>24</sup> Emboldened, Xie Fuzhi declared that the province would be completely irrigated within three years.<sup>25</sup>

The cost of success was high. In Chuxiong, near a highland lake as large as a sea, farmers enrolled on irrigation projects were routinely cursed and beaten. Villagers were tied up for stealing a few vegetables, others who failed to work hard enough were stabbed with knives by cadres trying to impose a ruthless work regime. A makeshift labour camp took care of recalcitrant elements. Party leaders higher up the chain of command were aware of these practices. In April 1958 a team was sent by the Yunnan provincial party committee to investigate the county. Hopeful rumours began to circulate among the villagers, one courageous individual trying to muster support for a collective grievance about insufficient food and long working hours. He was denounced as a 'reactionary' and a 'saboteur' in the final report sent to Xie Fuzhi.<sup>26</sup>

Some 130 kilometres to the east of the provincial capital Kunming, in the midst of a primeval forest with craggy mountains shaped out of sand and stone by erosion, Luliang county had been savaged by the provincial party committee for giving in to 'farmers' rightist demands' for grain in 1957. The new leader Chen Shengnian rigidly adhered to the party line, organising military squads who patrolled the village streets with leather whips, making sure that even sick villagers went out to work in the fields.<sup>27</sup> The first cases of death by starvation appeared in February 1958. By June oedema, or water retention, was widespread and a thousand villagers died of hunger, most of whom had worked on the Xichong reservoir. Oedema happens when fluids accumulate in the feet, ankles and legs or beneath the skin in other parts of the body. In developed countries it can be caused by mild changes in behaviour, for instance by eating too much salt or standing a lot when the weather is warm. In poor countries, however, it is caused by lack of protein and is seen as a symptom of malnutrition; it is sometimes called famine oedema. In Luliang medical teams were dispatched on several occasions to investigate these cases, but in the midst of the anti-rightist campaign none had the courage to identify oedema as a condition generally caused by hunger – as was well known in a country with a long record of famine. Some doctors even wondered whether it might be a contagious disease and prescribed antibiotics instead of bed rest and food.<sup>28</sup> At first the bodies of the dead were buried in coffins, but after a few months they were simply covered in mats and dumped in the ditches and ponds near construction sites.<sup>29</sup>

Yunnan was no exception. All over China farmers were being driven to the edge of starvation on gigantic irrigation schemes, pushed hard by cadres afraid of being labelled rightists. Having spent half an hour shovelling gravel himself, Mao was in a good position to see the human cost of the irrigation campaign. In March 1958, as he listened to a report by Jiang Weiqing on irrigation in Jiangsu, he mused that 'Wu Zhipu claims he can move 30 billion cubic metres; I think 30,000 people will die. Zeng Xisheng has said that he will move 20 billion cubic metres, and I think that 20,000 people will die. Weiqing only promises 600 million cubic metres, maybe nobody will die.'<sup>30</sup> Mass mobilisation on water-conservancy schemes continued unabated for several years, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of exhausted villagers already weakened by hunger. In a chilling precursor of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, villagers in Qingshui, Gansu, called these projects the 'killing fields'.<sup>31</sup>

## Launching Sputniks

Charts with rising targets, beautifully drafted with colour-coded diagrams, made a stark contrast with the killing fields. As targets rocketed skywards in every conceivable domain, from grain output and steel production to the number of wells dug in the countryside, a dark chasm appeared between a world of slogans and the reality on the ground. Behind the pressure which produced this gap was the hand of Mao. In informal exchanges he needed and goaded local bosses to commit to ever higher production targets.

Zhou Xiaozhou, the cautious leader of Mao's native Hunan, was one of the first to be harangued in November 1957. 'Why can't Hunan increase its agricultural production?' Mao asked, on a visit to the provincial capital Changsha. 'Why do the Hunan peasants still plant only one crop of rice a year?' After Zhou explained that the weather permitted only a single crop a year, Mao pointed out that Zhejiang was on the same latitude as Hunan and planted two crops of rice. 'You are not even studying other experiences. That's the trouble,' Mao continued.

'We will study the matter, then,' Zhou responded meekly.

'What do you mean study?' Mao demanded. 'You won't get anywhere with your study. You can go now,' he added, dismissing the party leader. He opened a book and began to read.

A humiliated Zhou then promised: 'We'll try to start two plantings right away.' Mao ignored him.<sup>1</sup>

A few months later, when Zhou's representative met the Chairman in Beijing, Mao lavished praise on Henan instead. Henan produced half the country's wheat: 'What do you think of that?' Then he shared his disappointment with Hunan. Luxembourg had a population of 300,000 but produced 3 million tonnes of steel a year. Now how many people were there in Hunan?<sup>2</sup>

Mao also sent close allies to hammer home the message. Just as Deng Xiaoping was his trusted lieutenant in the campaign against rightists, Tan Zhenlin was a zealot put in charge of agriculture. A short man topped by a bush of dense hair with thick glasses and trout lips, he was a close follower of Mao and an ally of Ke Qingshi, the rising star of Shanghai. He was described by a former colleague as a sarcastic man who was ruthlessly 'mission-oriented'.<sup>3</sup> His advice to colleagues who were summoned by the Chairman was to proffer instant self-criticism, whether or not they were at fault.<sup>4</sup> Tan spent many months touring the country, whipping up the pressure behind the Great Leap Forward. He was unimpressed with what he saw in Hunan, a province he considered a laggard.<sup>5</sup> As he threatened to denounce it as politically backward, a reluctant Zhou Xiaozhou started inflating the crop figures.<sup>6</sup>

Outside the corridors of power where one-to-one encounters took place, the telephone was used to keep up the pressure. In a country the size of China, it allowed a leader to stay in touch with his subordinates regardless of physical distance. In the frenzy to produce more steel, for instance, Xie Fuzhi would phone around Yunnan to impress on county secretaries the danger of falling behind neighbours Guangxi and Guizhou.<sup>7</sup> The party secretary, in turn, was regularly given updates by the Ministry of Metallurgy. On 4 September 1958, for instance, the latest results were phoned in by Beijing.<sup>8</sup> Then on 6 September a speech by Mao was transmitted in a telephone conference, followed by a talk on steel targets by Bo Yibo on 8 September, by Peng Zhen on 11 September, and by Wang Heshou on 16 September. In the meantime, countless other conferences on agriculture, industry and collectivisation were given by telephone from the capital.<sup>9</sup> How often the phone was used we do not know, but at the height of the campaign one local cadre in a commune in Guangdong estimated that some ninety telephone conferences took place in a single season in 1960 to ensure close planting (sowing seeds more densely in the hope that the crop would increase – also known as close cropping).<sup>10</sup>

Pressure was also maintained through the ad-hoc party gatherings called by Mao, who dominated the agenda to promote new ideological themes and escalate production targets.<sup>11</sup> Bo Yibo – one of the planners taken to task by Mao for opposing a surge in output – contributed in no small measure to the frenzy by replacing a single set of national targets with a system of dual planning at the Nanning meeting in January 1958. To this Mao added a third set. It worked as follows: the centre was to have one set of targets that had to be achieved, while the second plan was merely expected to be accomplished. This second plan was handed over to the provinces and became their first set of targets which had to be reached at all cost. The provinces were then asked to have



a second plan reflecting what they expected to be accomplished, making for three sets in total. The system percolated downwards to the counties, in effect adding a fourth set of production plans. As the national targets were ceaselessly revised upwards at party meetings, the whole system of defined and desired targets created an orgy of inflation all the way down to the village, resulting in a great leap in targets.<sup>12</sup>

A process of emulation further added to the political tension. Mao not only denigrated timorous colleagues and praised the more radical ones in full view of their subordinates, he was also inclined to compare everything and everyone with something else to heighten a competitive spirit. Hunan was juxtaposed to Luxembourg in steel production, China was stacked up against Britain when it came to industrial output, Gansu was set against Henan in the irrigation drive. This, too, was enshrined in the directives Mao distributed to party leaders at Nanning: to boost its competitive spirit the whole nation was to engage in comparison. Regular reviews in endless meetings at all levels bestowed three categories of designation on provinces, cities, counties, communes, factories and even individuals, all on the basis of their achievements. A 'red flag' was granted to those judged to be advanced, a 'grey flag' was given to those considered mediocre, and a 'white flag' was punishment for the backward. Handed out during meetings after work, these symbolic designations, sometimes drawn on a blackboard next to a unit's name, had the power to confer shame in a society in which even the slightest lack of political enthusiasm could cause somebody to be labelled a rightist. The whole country became a universe of norms, quotas and targets from which escape was all but impossible, as loudspeakers blasted slogans, cadres checked and appraised work, and committees endlessly ranked and rated the world around them. And classification of individual performance would increasingly determine the kind of treatment meted out – down to the ladle of gruel in the canteen in times of hunger. Mao was clear: 'Compare: how should we compare? What we call "comparison" [bi] is really "compulsion" [bi].'<sup>13</sup> A county official recalled the experience thus:

That year, we pooled all our able hands together to work on water well drilling, leaving spring farming unattended. The prefecture party committee held a pingbi [assessment and comparison] meeting at which we received a 'red flag' for well drilling and a 'white flag' for spring farming. I went back to the county party committee to report this and got blasted by the party secretary: 'how could you have left with a red flag but come back with a white flag!' I realised then that the problem was very serious. I myself could be picked as a 'white flag'. Thus I had to leave my sobbing wife who was due to give birth soon and my dying sister who was infected with tetanus to go back to the work site in the mountains.<sup>14</sup>

Soon all of China was in the grip of target fever, as fantastic figures for agricultural and industrial output competed for attention. These claims were trundled out at party meetings and publicised by a powerful propaganda machine, covering the leaders behind the latest record in glory. The numbers were stratospheric, and achieving a new high was called 'launching a sputnik' – in honour of the first satellite hurled into space by the socialist camp the previous year. To 'launch a sputnik', to 'join the party in combat', to 'work hard for a few days and nights' were ways of getting a red flag. In Chayashan, Henan, soon to become the country's first people's commune (known as the 'Sputnik Commune'), a goal of 4,200 kilos of wheat per hectare was set in February 1958. As 6,000 activists roamed the countryside with a river of banners, posters, leaflets and slogans, targets were cranked up. By the end of the year an entirely fictitious level of 37.5 tonnes per hectare was promised.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these records were achieved on 'sputnik fields', high-yield experimental plots touted by local cadres keen on setting new records. These were generally limited to a small strip of land in any one collective farm, but the plots acted as showcases for new agricultural techniques that found a much wider application. Increasing the yield encouraged a scramble for fertiliser. Every conceivable kind of nutrient was thrown on to the fields, from weed dragged from the sea and garbage salvaged from refuse heaps to soot scraped from chimneys. Animal and human waste was carried to the fields by endless rows of people, sometimes until deep into the night. Where excrement was traditionally viewed as a dirty and polluting substance by the many minority people who lived along the outer reaches of the empire, outdoor toilets were built for the first time, the party riding roughshod over local sensibilities. Collecting it became a task assigned to punishment teams.<sup>16</sup> Human waste extended to hair, and in some Guangdong villages women were forced to shave their heads to contribute fertiliser or face a ban from the canteen.<sup>17</sup>

But most of the time buildings made of mud and straw were torn down to provide nutrients for the soil. Walls of buildings where animals had lived and especially where they had urinated, such as stables, could provide useful fertiliser. At first old walls and abandoned huts were destroyed, but as the campaign gained momentum

entire rows of houses were systematically razed to the ground, the mud bricks shattered and strewn across the fields. In Macheng, nestled against the south of the Dabie mountain range in Hubei, thousands of houses were demolished to collect fertiliser. In January 1958 the model county was exalted by Wang Renzhong, party secretary of the province, for reaching a rice yield of six tonnes per hectare: 'Let Us Learn from Macheng!' the People's Daily declared rapturously. Once it had been praised by Mao for its experimental plots, Macheng became a shrine. In the following months it attracted half a million cadres, including Zhou Enlai, foreign minister Chen Yi and Li Xiannian. By August a new record was achieved with a yield of 277 tonnes of rice per hectare: 'The Era of Miracles!' the propaganda machine proclaimed.<sup>18</sup>

On the ground the pressure was unrelenting, wild boasts and false figures vying for attention. In one Macheng commune the head of the Women's Federation took the lead by moving out of her house and allowing it to be turned into fertiliser: within two days 300 houses, fifty cattle pens and hundreds of chicken coops had been pulled down. By the end of the year some 50,000 buildings had been destroyed.<sup>19</sup> Trying to outdo one another, other communes throughout the country followed suit. In Dashi, Guangdong, a commune that also attracted nationwide attention with its 'Twenty-five-Tonne Grain University' and 'Five-Thousand-Kilo Field', local cadres pulverised half of all houses in Xi'er.<sup>20</sup> Other organic matter found its way into the fields: in parts of Jiangsu province, the land was covered in white sugar.<sup>21</sup>

Deep ploughing was another revolutionary recipe meant to free the farmers from the capricious soil. The deeper the planting, the stronger the roots and the taller the stalk, or so ran the logic behind this experiment. 'Use human waves, and turn every field over,' commanded Mao.<sup>22</sup> If shovelling gravel on irrigation projects was tough, deep tilling to a depth ranging from forty centimetres to more than a metre – sometimes three metres – was totally exhausting. Where tools were lacking, ranks of farmers dug furrows by hand, sometimes throughout the night by the light of fire torches. Goaded by cadres eager to achieve a coveted red flag, villagers now and then burrowed through the earth to bedrock, destroying the topsoil. By September 1958 some 8 million hectares had been tilled to a depth of about thirty centimetres, but the leadership still demanded more, all of it at least sixty centimetres deep.<sup>23</sup>

This was followed by heavy concentrations of seed in the search for higher yields. Initially these half-baked experiments were carried out on artificial plots, but they spread to the fields in the following years under the watchful eyes of radical cadres. In Diaofang, Guangdong, up to 600 kilos of seed were sown per hectare in barren, mountainous areas in the middle of the famine in 1960.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere in the province farmers were conscripted to sow more than 250 kilos of kernels on a single hectare: by the end of the season the yield per hectare turned out to be a paltry 525 kilos of peanuts.<sup>25</sup>

Close cropping was the cornerstone of innovative tilling. Seeds too, it seemed, showed a revolutionary spirit, those belonging to the same class sharing light and nutrients in a spurt of equality. Explained Chairman Mao: 'With company they grow easily, when they grow together they will be more comfortable.'<sup>26</sup> More often than not, villagers were instructed to transplant rice shoots from adjacent strips on to the experimental plot, squeezing the clumps closely together. Villagers, of course, knew better: they had tilled the land for generations, and knew how to care for a precious resource on which their livelihoods depended. Many were incredulous, some trying to reason with the cadres: 'You plant the seedlings too closely, there is not enough breathing space between them, and then you add ten tonnes of fertiliser per field. It will suffocate them to death.' But advice was ignored: 'It's a new technique, you don't understand!'<sup>27</sup>

Most villagers, having witnessed a series of anti-rightist campaigns since 1957, were too wily ever to object in public. Every survivor who was interviewed for this book told a similar story: 'We knew about the situation, but no one dared to say anything. If you said anything, they would beat you up. What could we do?'<sup>28</sup> Another explained: 'Whatever the government said, we had to follow. If I said something wrong, if what I said was against the general line, then I would be labelled as a rightist. No one dared to say anything.'<sup>29</sup> What happened in a village in Quxian county, Zhejiang, provides a good example: large cauldrons of gruel were set up in the fields, and nobody was allowed to leave, be they pregnant mothers who needed to feed their children or elderly people wishing to take a rest. People had to slog throughout the night, since cadres had blocked off all exits back to the village. Those who objected to close planting were beaten by party activists. One stubborn old man who somehow failed to show enough enthusiasm was yanked by his hair and pushed face down into the ditch. Then the villagers were ordered to pull out the seedlings and start all over again.<sup>30</sup>

Visits were carefully stage-managed. In Macheng, villagers were warned never to say a bad word about the Great Leap Forward in front of visitors. As provincial leader Wang Renzhong inspected the fields, he saw farmers

tucking into mounds of rice, carefully laid out for his visit.<sup>31</sup> In Xushui, Zhang Guozhong, a military man, ruthlessly ensured that the image presented to the outside world was flawless: undesirable elements disappeared into an elaborate labour-camp system, extending from the county down to every commune, brigade and production team. In order to 'stimulate production', laggards were paraded before being locked up, some 7,000 people being rounded up between 1958 and 1960.<sup>32</sup> In Luoding, Guangdong, inspection committees visiting Liantan commune in late 1958 were welcomed by a posse of young girls, expensive perfumes, white towels and a lavish banquet with sixteen dishes. Dozens of farmers worked for days on end to carve a huge slogan praising the communes into the mountainside.<sup>33</sup> Li Zhisui, who accompanied Mao on his visits, was told that farmers had been ordered to transplant rice plants along the Chairman's route to give the impression of a bumper harvest. The doctor commented that 'All of China was a stage, all the people performers in an extravaganza for Mao.'<sup>34</sup> But in reality a dictatorship never has one dictator only, as many people become willing to scramble for power over the next person above them. The country was full of local hegemons, each trying to deceive the next one up into believing that their achievements were genuine.

Mao was delighted. As reports came in from all over the country about new records in cotton, rice, wheat or peanut production, he started wondering what to do with all the surplus food. On 4 August 1958 in Xushui, flanked by Zhang Guozhong, surrounded by journalists, plodding through the fields in straw hat and cotton shoes, he beamed: 'How are you going to eat so much grain? What are you going to do with the surplus?'

'We can exchange it for machinery,' Zhang responded after a pause for thought.

'But you are not the only one to have a surplus, others too have too much grain! Nobody will want your grain!' Mao shot back with a benevolent smile.

'We can make spirits out of taro,' suggested another cadre.

'But every county will make spirits! How many tonnes of spirits do we need?' Mao mused. 'With so much grain, in future you should plant less, work half time and spend the rest of your time on culture and leisurely pursuits, open schools and a university, don't you think? . . . You should eat more. Even five meals a day is fine!'<sup>35</sup>

At long last, China had found a way out of grinding poverty, solving the problem of hunger and producing more food than the people could possibly eat. As reports came in from all over the country pointing at a bumper harvest twice the size of the previous year, other leaders joined in the chorus. Tan Zhenlin, in charge of agriculture, toured the provinces to galvanise the local leadership. He shared Mao's vision of a communist cornucopia in which farmers dined on delicacies like swallows' nests, wore silk, satin and fox furs, and lived in skyscrapers with piped water and television. Every county would have an airport.<sup>36</sup> Tan even explained how China had managed to leave the Soviet Union in the dust: 'Some comrades will wonder how we manage to be so fast, since the Soviet Union is still practising socialism instead of communism. The difference is that we have a "continuous revolution". The Soviet Union doesn't have one, or follows it loosely . . . Communisation is the communist revolution!'<sup>37</sup> Chen Yi, on the other hand, opined that since enough grain could be stored over the next couple of years, farmers should then stop growing crops for two seasons and devote their time instead to building villas with all modern amenities.<sup>38</sup> Local leaders were just as enthusiastic. In January 1959 the State Council had to put a stop to the deluge of people, letters and gifts sent by communes to Beijing to testify to new records set in agriculture. The Chairman was inundated.<sup>39</sup>



## Let the Shelling Begin

The remains of Laika, the stray dog catapulted into orbit days before the celebration marking the October Revolution, were burned up as Sputnik II disintegrated on re-entering the atmosphere in April 1958. As the space coffin circled the earth, the world below it changed. Fired by the missile gap the Russians had exposed, President Eisenhower sent ballistic missiles to Great Britain, Italy and Turkey. Khrushchev responded with submarines carrying nuclear missiles. But, for his threat to be credible, a submarine base in the Pacific Ocean was needed, which in turn required a radio transmitter station. Moscow approached Beijing with a proposal to build long-wave radio stations on the Chinese coast, suggesting that they might serve a joint submarine fleet.

On 22 July Soviet ambassador Pavel Yudin sounded out the Chairman with a proposal. Mao flew into a rage. During a stormy meeting, he attacked the hapless ambassador, claiming, 'You just don't trust the Chinese, you only trust the Russians. Russians are superior beings, and the Chinese are inferior, careless people, that's why you came up with this proposal. You want joint ownership, you want everything as joint ownership, our army, navy, air force, industry, agriculture, culture, education: how about it? Why don't we hand over our thousands of kilometres of coastline to you, we will just maintain a guerrilla force. You have a few atomic bombs and now you want to control everything, you want to rent and lease. Why else would you come up with this proposal?' Khrushchev, Mao continued, behaved towards China like a cat playing with a mouse.<sup>1</sup>

The outburst came like a bolt out of the blue to the Russians: seeing conspiracies everywhere, Mao was convinced that the proposal for a joint fleet was a manoeuvre by Khrushchev to renege on a promise made a year earlier to deliver an atom bomb, and no amount of explaining could allay Mao's suspicions.<sup>2</sup>

On 31 July Khrushchev flew to Beijing to save the situation. But whereas lavish hospitality had welcomed Mao in Moscow seven months earlier, the Soviet leader was met with a cool reception at the airport. 'No red carpet, no guards of honour, and no hugs,' recalled interpreter Li Yueran, just a stony-faced team including Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping.<sup>3</sup> Khrushchev was relegated to lodgings without air-conditioning up in the hills far out of Beijing. Moving his bed to the terrace to escape the stifling heat, that night he was devoured by swarms of mosquitoes.<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after Khrushchev's arrival a long and humiliating meeting was held at Zhongnanhai. The Soviet leader was forced to explain Yudin's démarche at great length, and took pains to defuse a visibly irritated Mao. Impatient, Mao at one point jumped out of his chair to wave a finger in Khrushchev's face: 'I asked you what a common fleet is, you still didn't answer me!'

Khrushchev became flushed and strained to stay calm.<sup>5</sup> 'Do you really think that we are red imperialists?' he asked in exasperation, to which Mao retorted that 'there was a man who went by the name of Stalin' who had turned Xinjiang and Manchuria into semi-colonies. After more squabbling about real or perceived slights, the idea of a joint fleet was finally abandoned.<sup>6</sup>

More humiliation followed next day, as Mao, clad only in a bathrobe and slippers, received Khrushchev by the side of his swimming pool in Zhongnanhai. Mao realised that Khrushchev did not know how to swim, and put the Soviet leader on the defensive. After spluttering about with a bulky lifebelt in the shallow end, Khrushchev ended up crawling out of the pool and floundered on the edge, clumsily dangling his legs in the water while Mao swam back and forth, showing off different strokes to his guest before turning on to his back and floating comfortably in the water.<sup>7</sup> All the while, interpreters scurried about at the side of the pool trying to catch the meaning of the Chairman's political musings. Later Mao explained to his doctor that this had been his way of 'sticking a needle up Khrushchev's arse'.<sup>8</sup>

Mao had started a bidding war with Khrushchev in Moscow half a year earlier. Now, treading water as his host sat defeated by the side of the pool, the Chairman talked about the success of the Great Leap Forward. 'We have so much rice that we no longer know what to do with it,' he bragged, echoing what Liu Shaoqi had told Khrushchev a few days earlier at the airport when reviewing the country's economy: 'What we worry about now is not so much lack of food, but rather what to do with the grain surplus.'<sup>9</sup> A baffled Khrushchev diplomatically replied that he was unable to help Mao with his predicament. 'We all work hard yet never manage to build up a

good reserve,' Khrushchev thought. 'China is hungry but now he tells me there is too much rice!'<sup>10</sup>

Over the years Mao had taken the measure of Khrushchev. Now he bossed him around, dismissing the need for a submarine base and brushing aside a request for a radio station. The Soviet delegation went home empty-handed. But this was not the end of it, as Mao was determined to take the initiative in world affairs. A few weeks later, on 23 August, without advance warning to Moscow, Mao gave the order to start shelling the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait, controlled by Chiang Kai-shek, triggering an international crisis. The United States responded by reinforcing its naval units and arming a hundred jet fighters in Taiwan with air-to-air missiles. On 8 September Moscow was forced to take sides by throwing its weight behind Beijing, proclaiming that an attack on the People's Republic of China would be considered an attack on the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Mao was jubilant. He had forced Khrushchev to extend the protective mantle of nuclear power to China while at the same time wrecking Moscow's bid to reduce tensions with Washington. As he put it to his doctor, 'The islands are two batons that keep Khrushchev and Eisenhower dancing, scurrying this way and that. Don't you see how wonderful they are?'<sup>12</sup>

But the real reason for the bombing of the islands had nothing to do with international relations. Mao wanted to create a heightened sense of tension to promote collectivisation: 'A tense situation helps to mobilise people, in particular those who are backward, those middle-of-the-roaders . . . The people's communes should organise militias. Everyone in our country is a soldier.'<sup>13</sup> The Taiwan Strait crisis provided the final rationale for the entire militarisation of the country. An East German studying in China at the time called it 'Kasernenkommunismus', or communism of the barracks, and it found its expression in the people's communes.<sup>14</sup>



**Bank of America**



**BLUE LODGE MASONS 1-3, outer court**

**RED LODGE Masons 4+ also hidden higher level ones from dupe  
masons. 13=Royal Arch 18=Rosicrucian etc**

**Blue pill or Red Pill?,**

**Red/White/Blue Masonic colors Satanic Judaeo-Masonic French  
Revolution**

## The People's Communes

A day after the meeting with Khrushchev by the swimming pool, Li Zhisui was summoned by Mao. At three o'clock in the morning, the Chairman wanted an English lesson from the doctor. Later, over breakfast, a relaxed Mao handed him a report about the creation of a people's commune in his model province, Henan. 'This is an extraordinary event,' Mao said excitedly about the fusion of smaller agricultural co-operatives into a giant collective. 'This term "people's commune" is great.'<sup>1</sup> Could this be the bridge to communism that Stalin had never found?

Soon after the water-conservancy campaign had kicked off in the autumn of 1957, collective farms had started to merge into much larger entities, in particular in regions where large inputs of manpower were required. One of the largest collectives appeared in Chayashan, Henan, where some 9,400 households were fused into a giant administrative unit. But the inspiration behind the people's communes can be traced back to Xushui county.

Located a hundred kilometres south of Beijing in the dry and dusty countryside of North China, marked by harsh winters, spring floods and an alkaline soil that hardly yielded enough grain for villagers to survive on, Xushui, a small county of some 300,000 people, quickly came to the attention of the Chairman. Its local leader Zhang Guozhong approached the irrigation projects like a field campaign. Conscripting a workforce of 100,000 men, he divided farmers along military lines into battalions, companies and platoons. He cut off links with the villages and had the troops live in the open, sleeping in makeshift barracks and eating in collective canteens.

Zhang's approach was highly effective and attracted the attention of the leadership in Beijing in September 1957.<sup>2</sup> Tan Zhenlin, for one, was bowled over: 'Xushui county', he exclaimed in February 1958, 'has created a new experience in water conservancy!' By collectivising the villagers into disciplined units responding to the call with military precision, Zhang had simultaneously solved the problem of labour and that of capital. Where other counties faced labour shortages as the men abandoned the fields to work on irrigation schemes, he deployed his troops in a continuous revolution, tackling one project after another, one wave coming in as another crested. The key terms were 'militarisation' (junshihua), 'combatisation' (zhandouhua) and 'disciplinisation' (jilühua). Each brigade was handed responsibility for seven hectares from which an annual yield of fifty tonnes was mandated. 'Two or three years of hard work will transform our natural environment,' explained Zhang. 'A mere two seasons and a Great Leap Forward appears!' enthused Tan.<sup>3</sup> Mao read the reports and added his comment: 'the experience of Xushui should be widely promoted'.<sup>4</sup>

A few weeks later the People's Daily hailed Xushui, identifying the militarisation of the workforce as the key to success.<sup>5</sup> Then, in a short article in Red Flag published on 1 July 1958, Chen Boda, the Chairman's ghost-writer, envisaged farmers armed as militia, all welded into giant communes: 'a nation in arms is absolutely vital'.<sup>6</sup> In a spurt of publicity, Mao toured the country, visiting Hebei, Shandong and Henan, praising the way in which farmers were regimented into battalions and platoons, and lauding the canteens, nurseries and retirement homes which freed women from domestic burdens to propel them to the front line. 'The people's commune is great!' he proclaimed. China was on a mobilisation footing, as local cadres throughout the country scrambled over the summer to fuse collective farms into people's communes, bringing together up to 20,000 households into basic administrative units. By the end of 1958 the whole of the countryside was collectivised into some 26,000 communes.

At the leadership's annual retreat by the beach resort of Beidaihe, where large, luxurious bungalows overlooked the Bohai Sea, Mao believed he stood on the verge of a millennial breakthrough. On 23 August 1958, as the heavy bombardment of Quemoy was about to start, he poured scorn on the rigid system of material incentives devised by Stalin. 'With a surplus of grain we can implement the supply system . . . The socialism we are building right now nurtures the sprouts of communism.' The people's commune was the golden bridge to communism, bringing free food to all: 'If we can provide food without cost, that would be a great transformation. I guess that in about ten years' time commodities will be abundant, moral standards will be

high. We can start communism with food, clothes and housing. Collective canteens, free food, that's communism!<sup>7</sup>

Zhang Guozhong, lionised over the summer at party conferences in Beijing, responded to Mao's prompting, and confidently predicted the arrival of communism by 1963.<sup>8</sup> On 1 September the People's Daily declared that in the not too distant future Xushui Commune would carry its members into a paradise where each could take according to his needs.<sup>9</sup> In the midst of a nationwide euphoria, Liu Shaoqi visited the commune a week later. He had promised communism earlier than anybody else, telling workers at an electricity plant in July that 'China will soon enter communism; it won't take long, many of you can already see it.' Overtaking Britain, he added, was no longer a matter of a decade: two or three years would suffice.<sup>10</sup> Now, having seen the communes, he pushed for a supply system in which meals, clothes, shelter, medical care and all other essential aspects of everyday life were provided without pay by the commune.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the month Fanxian county, Shandong, at a giant meeting of thousands of party activists, solemnly pledged to pass the bridge to communism by 1960. Mao was ecstatic. 'This document is really good, it is a poem, and it looks as if it can be done!'<sup>12</sup>

The people's communes satisfied a growing demand on the part of local cadres for labour, as they strained to accomplish ever more onerous tasks in the Great Leap Forward. On the ground, however, villagers were less enthusiastic. As everyday life came to be organised along military lines, villagers were 'footsoldiers' who had to 'fight battles' on the 'front line' in 'battalions' and 'platoons', while 'shock brigades' might 'stage a march' in 'mobile warfare'. A revolutionary's appointed position in society was a 'sentry post', while a group of people working on a large project was a 'great army'.<sup>13</sup>

Martial terms were matched by military organisation. 'Everyone a soldier,' Mao had proclaimed, and the formation of popular militias helped to regiment the rest of society into people's communes: 'In the past in our army there was no such thing as a salary, or a Sunday, or eight hours of work a day. Rank and file, we were all the same. A real spirit of communism comes when you raise a giant people's army . . . We need to revive military traditions.' He explained: 'Military communism in the Soviet Union was based on grain procurements; we have twenty-two years of military traditions, and the supply system is behind our military communism.'<sup>14</sup>

'Ballistic missiles and atom bombs will never scare the Chinese people,' bellowed the People's Daily as shells hit Quemoy, the nation rising as one man, ready to do battle against the forces of imperialism: 250 million men and women were to be transformed into a sea of soldiers.<sup>15</sup> By October 30 million militiamen in Sichuan spent two hours in military training in the evening. In Shandong 25 million fighting men were the 'main army' on the 'front line' of steel and grain production. In Yingnan county alone, 70,000 of these drilled men took charge of half a million villagers in the battle to deep-plough. In Heilongjiang, out in northern Manchuria, there were 6 million militiamen, as martial habits were instilled into nine out of ten young men.<sup>16</sup> Tan Zhenlin raved about the militia, prescribing that each adult should learn how to use a gun and fire thirty bullets a year.<sup>17</sup> In reality few carried guns. Many merely went through the motions, training half-heartedly by the fields with a few old-fashioned rifles after work. But a small proportion practised with live ammunition and were trained as shock troops.<sup>18</sup> They would turn out to be crucial in enforcing discipline, not only during the frenzy to establish communes, but throughout the years of famine that lay ahead.

The militia movement and a small corps of trained fighters brought military organisation to every commune. All over China farmers were roused from sleep at dawn at the sound of the bugle and filed into the canteen for a quick bowl of watery rice gruel. Whistles were blown to gather the workforce, which moved in military step to the fields, carrying banners and flags to the sound of marching songs. Loudspeakers sometimes blasted exhortations to work harder, or occasionally played revolutionary music. Party activists, local cadres and the militia enforced discipline, sometimes punishing underachievers with beatings. At the end of the day, villagers returned to their living quarters, assigned according to each person's work shift. Meetings followed in the evening to evaluate each worker's performance and review the local tactics.

Labour was appropriated by the communes, men and women being at the command of team leaders, more often than not without adequate compensation. Explained party secretary Zhang Xianli in Macheng: 'Now that we have communes, with the exception of a chamber pot, everything is collective, even human beings.' This was understood by poor farmer Lin Shengqi to mean: 'You do whatever you are told to do by a cadre.'<sup>19</sup> Wages, as a consequence, were virtually abolished. Members of a production team, working under the supervision of a



squad leader, were credited with points instead, calculated according to a complex system based on the average performance of the team as a whole, the job carried out and the age and gender of each worker. At the end of the year, the net income of each team was distributed among members 'according to need', and the surplus was in principle divided according to the work points that each had accumulated. In practice a surplus hardly ever existed, as the state came in and took the lot. Work points, moreover, devalued rapidly during the Great Leap Forward. In Jiangning county, just outside Nanjing, one work day was equivalent to 1.05 yuan in 1957. A year later it was worth no more than 28 cents. By 1959, its value had declined to a mere 16 cents. Locals referred to the point system as 'beating a drum with a cucumber': the harder you beat the less you heard, as all incentives to work had been removed.<sup>20</sup>

Some never got paid at all. Chen Yuquan, a sturdy young man interviewed in February 1961 in Xiangtan county, Hunan, recalled that he had made a total of 4.50 yuan in 1958, with which he bought a pair of trousers. The following year, having been dispatched to a coal mine where no record of work was kept, he did not receive anything.<sup>21</sup> Some communes did away with money altogether. In Longchuan county, Guangdong, villagers who sold their pigs were handed credit notes instead of cash, prompting people to slaughter and eat the animals themselves.<sup>22</sup> But in many cases villagers had to borrow from the commune, entering a form of bonded labour. Li Yeye, who had to feed his chronically ill wife and five children by carrying manure all day long, never had any cash: 'People like us had no money, we were constantly in debt. We had to pay back our debt to the commune.'<sup>23</sup> Feng Dabai, a barber from northern Sichuan who looked after a family of nine during the famine, had to borrow so much food that he was still paying off his debt fifty years later.<sup>24</sup>

In the most radical communes, private plots, heavy tools and livestock all had to be turned over to the collective. In many cases people were allowed to keep nothing but the bare essentials. As Li Jingquan, the leader of Sichuan, put it: 'Even shit has to be collectivised!'<sup>25</sup> In response villagers tried to salvage as much of their property as possible. They slaughtered livestock, hid grain and sold assets. At the very start of the movement, Hu Yongming, a farmer from the humid, hilly north-east of Guangdong, killed four chickens, followed on day two by three ducks. Then came three female dogs, the puppies being slaughtered next. Finally the cat was eaten.<sup>26</sup> Many did the same, as farmers devoured poultry and livestock. Throughout the villages of Guangdong, chicken and ducks were eaten first, followed by hogs and cows. Local officials, keen on numbers, thought that the consumption of pork and vegetables alone increased by some 60 per cent with the advent of the communes, as locals consumed the produce of their private plots in fear of collectivisation.<sup>27</sup> A common saying in Guangdong was 'What you eat is yours, what you don't is anyone's.'<sup>28</sup>

A similar scenario followed in the cities, although attempts to impose urban communes were generally abandoned until a few years later. In the first few weeks of October 1958 over half a million yuan was withdrawn from the bank in one single district in Guangzhou.<sup>29</sup> In Wuhan there was a run on the bank, a fifth of all savings having been cashed within two days of the foundation of the East commune.<sup>30</sup> Some workers in small enterprises even sold the sewing machines on which they relied for their livelihoods, others tearing up the floorboards of their homes for timber, to be sold as fuel.<sup>31</sup> Afraid that their savings would be confiscated, once parsimonious people started to indulge in conspicuous consumption. Ordinary workers bought expensive brands of cigarettes and other luxury goods; some even splurged on extravagant banquets.<sup>32</sup> Rumours fired collective fears: it was said that in some villages each person was allowed only a blanket, everything else being communal: 'even clothes have numbers'.<sup>33</sup>

In the drive to increase production and meet ever higher targets, homes were also confiscated: the commune, after all, needed bricks for the canteens, dormitories, nurseries and retirement homes planned on paper. In Macheng, as we have seen, houses were initially pulled down for fertiliser, a trend made worse by the advent of the people's communes. Throughout the county villagers started sharing houses, some families ending up in makeshift sheds. Recalcitrant farmers were told that 'no grain rations will be issued to those who do not move out'. In some villages a grandiose vision of modernity justified the elimination of old houses. In Guishan commune, thirty dwellings were pulled down to make way for a utopian plan in which paved streets and skyscrapers would replace the mud huts lining dusty lanes. Not a single new house was built, and some families ended up living in pigsties or abandoned temples, with rain leaking through the roof and wind blowing through porous walls built of mud and straw. 'Destroying my home is even worse than digging up my ancestor's gravestone,' one villager cried. But few dared to complain. Most quietly stood by, sometimes in tears, as the

local leader walked past without uttering a word, simply lifting his finger to mark out a house for destruction.<sup>34</sup> In Dianjiang county, Sichuan, a team of eleven people went around torching hundreds of straw huts. 'Destroy Straw Huts in an Evening, Erect Residential Areas in Three Days, Build Communism in a Hundred Days' was the leading slogan. Some villages were emptied altogether, although somehow nobody quite managed to get beyond the destruction phase of the plan.<sup>35</sup> Houses were also pulled down specifically to separate men from women in the great drive to regiment the countryside. In Jingning, Gansu, some 10,000 dwellings were pulverised during the Great Leap Forward on the order of provincial boss Zhang Zhongliang. Most of the displaced people ended up not in dormitories as envisaged by model communes but living on the streets, destitute.<sup>36</sup>

Except for the most deprived villagers, most people did not like the canteens, if only because sprawling collectives run on a shoestring could hardly cater to individual whims, tastes and diets. Some people had to walk for many kilometres to reach the collective facilities. In Hunan over two-thirds of all villagers were opposed to communal eating, according to the head of the province, Zhou Xiaozhou.<sup>37</sup> Across the country cadres had to apply pressure to get the villagers into the canteens. In Macheng they used a simple but effective approach by simply cutting off grain supplies to the village. But families who had hoarded their own provisions still failed to turn up. They were denounced as 'rich peasants' intent on 'sabotaging the people's communes'. The militia then stepped in, patrolling the streets and fining families who had smoke escaping from the chimney. The final step was house-to-house confiscation of food and utensils.<sup>38</sup>

Once they sat down, villagers tucked in with a vengeance, all the keener as the new facilities had been set up with funds, food and furniture taken from the village. In one commune in Macheng, some 10,000 pieces of furniture, 3,000 hogs and 57,000 kilos of grain as well as countless trees, chopped down from private plots for fuel, went into the canteens.<sup>39</sup> Their labour exploited, their possessions confiscated and their homes demolished, villagers were presented with an opportunity to share in their leaders' vision. Communism was around the corner, and the state would provide. 'To each according to his needs' was taken literally, and for as long as they could get away with it people ate as much as they could. For about two months, in many villages throughout the country, people 'stretched their bellies', following Mao's directive at Xushui: 'You should eat more. Even five meals a day is fine!' Especially in regions where crops other than food were grown – for instance cotton – restraint was less pronounced, as the grain was provided by the state. Workers stuffed themselves, some being scolded for lack of appetite. Leftover rice was poured down the toilet by the bucketload. In some teams people held competitions to see who could eat the most, children being reduced to tears for failing to keep up. Others took Mao at his word, 'launching a sputnik' by having five meals a day. Food that would have fed a village for half a week vanished in a day.<sup>40</sup> In Jiangning county, Jiangsu, some villagers gobbled down a kilo of rice in a sitting. Extravagance in consumption was even greater in the cities, some 50 kilos of rice ending up in the gutter on a single day in late 1958 in a Nanjing workshop. Steamed dough buns blocked the toilets: one punctilious inspector noted that the rice on the bottom of a sewage vat was thirty centimetres thick. In some factories workers wolfed down up to twenty bowls of rice a day; the leftovers were fed to the pigs.<sup>41</sup> The feast did not last.

## Steel Fever

Stalin had financed industry at the expense of agriculture, as punishing procurements drained the countryside of all wealth. In search of an alternative to the Soviet model, Mao instead wanted to bring industry to the village. Industrial output in the people's communes could be raised immediately by relying on inexpensive innovations and indigenous techniques which did not require large amounts of investment, leading to an instant jump in productivity. This, in turn, would galvanise the villagers to achieve even greater economic targets: here was the key to industrialising a backward countryside without big foreign investment. Bourgeois specialists were excoriated as conservative rightists, while the earthbound wisdom of simple peasants was hailed instead. In Yunnan party boss Xie Fuzhi openly scoffed at geological measurements and technological surveys recommended by Russian experts, relying instead on the wisdom of the masses in building dams and reservoirs.<sup>1</sup> Intuitive knowledge and native ingenuity, rather than foreign expertise, would introduce cheap and effective innovations that would propel the villages of China past the Soviet Union. The countryside was to be mechanised through simple devices, developed by ordinary farmers in research institutes. 'The humble are the cleverest, the privileged are the dumbest,' Mao wrote on a report showing how workers had managed to build a tractor by themselves.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Xie Fuzhi claimed, repeating words of wisdom from the Chairman, 'We are supernatural. Maybe we are supernaturals of the second order. Maybe on another planet there are people who are brighter than we are, in which case we are of the second order, but if we are brighter than they are then we are supernaturals of the first order.'<sup>3</sup>

Model workers peopled party propaganda. He Ding, a poor farmer from Henan who never had a day of schooling in his life, devised a system of wooden earth-carriers moving on overhead cables with an automatic dump-and-return mechanism which reduced the amount of labour needed to build a reservoir by eight times.<sup>4</sup> Wooden conveyor belts, wooden threshing machines and wooden rice-planting machines, all were hailed as everyman miracles. In Shaanxi province, villagers even trotted out native cars and locomotives: every part was made of wood.<sup>5</sup> Most of these were innocent enough, but the waste could reach huge proportions. In Diaofang commune, Guangdong, some 22,000 beams, trusses and floorboards were torn out of people's homes overnight in a movement to mechanise the commune. The carts produced were so ramshackle that they fell to pieces the moment anyone tried to use one.<sup>6</sup>

But the real benchmark was steel. Here was material worthy to stand for socialism – hard, shiny, industrial, modern and working class. 'Stalin' stood for a man of steel willing to smash all the enemies of revolution to smithereens. Smoking factory stacks, whirring machine tools, the hooting of factory whistles, towering blast furnaces glowing a deep red with fire: these were the consecrated images of a socialist modernity. Alexei Gastev, the worker poet, wrote, 'We grow out of iron,' as man coalesced with iron in a fusion announcing a world in which machine became man and man was a machine. Steel was the sacred ingredient in the alchemy of socialism. The amount of steel produced was a magic figure recited with religious fervour in socialist countries. Steel output magically distilled all the complex dimensions of human activity into a single, precise figure that indicated where a country stood on the scale of evolution. Mao may not have been an expert on industry, but he seemed able to rattle off the steel output of virtually every country at the drop of a hat. He was possessed by steel, and overtaking Britain increasingly meant outstripping its annual steel production. Steel was the prime mover in the escalation of targets, and he pushed hard to have its output increased. It was 5.35 million tonnes in 1957. The target for 1958 was set at 6.2 million in February 1958, which was increased to 8.5 million tonnes in May, until Mao decided in June that 10.7 million tonnes could be produced. This changed to 12 million tonnes in September. As he juggled with the numbers he became convinced that by the end of 1960, China would catch up with the Soviet Union, the United States being overtaken in 1962 when an output of 100 million tonnes would be achieved. Then China would pull away, reaching 150 million tonnes in a few years. Seven hundred million tonnes of steel would be produced by 1975, leaving Britain trailing far behind.<sup>7</sup>

Mao was encouraged in his ravings by some of his close colleagues. Li Fuchun, for one, pronounced that China could develop at a speed unprecedented in human history thanks to the superiority of the socialist system:



Britain could be outstripped in a mere seven years. Then he presented an extravagant plan seeking to overtake Britain in iron, steel and other industrial commodities in less than three years.<sup>8</sup> In early June 1958, as Mao lounged by the swimming pool and asked minister of metallurgy Wang Heshou if steel production could be doubled, the minister replied, 'No problem!'<sup>9</sup> Ke Qingshi bragged that East China alone could produce 8 million tonnes.<sup>10</sup> Provincial leaders such as Wang Renzhong, Tao Zhu, Xie Fuzhi, Wu Zhipu and Li Jingquan all made extravagant pledges about steel production, indulging the Chairman in his visionary whims.

The key to success was small furnaces operated by villagers in every backyard of the people's communes. Built of sand, stone, fire clay or bricks, they were relatively simple affairs allowing every villager to be mobilised in the effort to overtake Britain. A typical backyard furnace was some three or four metres high with a wooden platform at the top, supported by beams. A sloping ramp provided access to the furnace, farmers scuttling up and down with sacks of coke, ore and flux on their backs or baskets slung on long poles. Air was blown through the bottom, the molten iron and slag being released through tap holes. Based on traditional blast methods, some may well have worked, but many were a sham, forced on the communes by cadres in the grip of steel fever.

The drive reached a climax in the late summer of 1958. Chen Yun, the party planner who had fallen into disgrace earlier in the year, was put in charge of the movement, and worked hard to redeem himself. On 21 August he transmitted orders from Mao that not a tonne below target would be tolerated, failure to fulfil the plan resulting in punishments ranging from a warning to expulsion from the party.<sup>11</sup> To maintain momentum Mao visited Wuhan in September to inaugurate a giant iron and steel combine built with Soviet help, watching the molten iron from the first firing come out of the furnace. That same day Beijing dispatched a team of 1,500 party activists to spread out over the country, whipping up support for the steel drive.<sup>12</sup> Then 29 September was designated as the day to achieve an even higher target in celebration of National Day. Two weeks ahead of the event, minister of metallurgy Wang Heshou in a telephone conference asked provincial leaders to rise to the challenge. They in turn galvanised county representatives by phone the following day.<sup>13</sup>

In Yunnan, Xie Fuzhi ordered everyone to become a soldier in the campaign, announcing a day-and-night assault for two weeks to increase production.<sup>14</sup> Party activists fanned out in the morning, some leaving well before sunrise to reach remote villages in good time. In Dehong county, 200,000 villagers were thrown into the campaign, as the sky shone crimson with the glow cast by thousands of brick furnaces. Villagers dispersed into the forests in search of fuel, others collected coal, sometimes digging with pick, spade and hands in the open country. In the frenzy to achieve targets, accidents were frequent. Trees were randomly felled, keeling over on villagers; explosive devices used by inexperienced workers to open up mines also claimed lives.<sup>15</sup> Xie Fuzhi phoned regularly to check the latest results.<sup>16</sup> He, in turn, was egged on by Bo Yibo, who transmitted a new target of 12 million tonnes, boasting that 40 million workers operated some 500,000 furnaces all over the country.<sup>17</sup> On National Day Bo announced that October should be the leap month for steel production, and another bout of madness followed. In Yunnan, the number of people involved in the movement jumped from 3 to 4 million, as a special 'high production' week was announced to set another record. 'The eyes of the world are fixed on China,' exclaimed Xie Fuzhi, as the country had to achieve the target it had trumpeted or face a humiliating climbdown.<sup>18</sup>

With pressure all the way from the top, villagers had little choice but to participate in the campaign. In the Qujing region, Yunnan, floorboards were torn up, and chickens were slaughtered so that their feathers could be used to feed the flames or make bellows. Squads of party activists moved from door to door to collect scrap iron, often confiscating household implements and farming tools. Those who failed to show enough enthusiasm were verbally abused, pushed around or even tied up and paraded. Critical reports written by party inspectors at the time talk about fear and intimidation. Coming in the wake of a year of relentless campaigns, one following on the heels of the last – irrigation schemes, fertiliser campaign, deep ploughing, close cropping, the onslaught of the people's communes – the mere mention of the slogan 'launching a satellite' was enough to instil dread, as it augured another 'bitter war' or 'night battle' in which nobody would be allowed any sleep for days on end. Some tried to slip away and sleep in the cold and wet forest in order to get a few hours of rest, looking from a distance at the furnaces glowing like fireflies in the night. They were cold and poorly fed: local cadres tried to lower the cost of making steel, thus inflating the figures, by skimping on provisions, which were now entirely in their hands thanks to the advent of collective canteens.<sup>19</sup>

China was dipped into a sea of fire. Everywhere furnaces were red hot, although the human dramas which played out during the campaign were different in each village. In Yunnan some farmers were forced to go

without adequate food or rest and were worked to death near the furnaces in the rush to complete the production target.<sup>20</sup> In other hamlets across the country people got away with a small gift of a pot or a pan. But two new dimensions were added to the theatre of violence, nipping in the bud any suspected insubordination. First, cadres could now count on the militia established within the people's communes to force through their orders. In Macheng, for instance, militiamen would come to a village and conscript people for work on the furnaces for days on end. One man who left work early was paraded through the streets with a dunce's cap inscribed: 'I am a deserter.'<sup>21</sup> Second, as all the food was now in the hands of the communes, cadres could use rations as a form of reward or punishment. Refusal to work – or any sign of slacking – was punished with a ration cut or deprivation of food altogether. Women who stayed home at night in Macheng to look after their children were banned from the canteen.<sup>22</sup> As Zhang Aihua, who lived through the famine in Anhui, later explained: 'You did as you were told, otherwise the boss gave you no food: his hand held the ladle.'<sup>23</sup> The grip cadres had over the food supply was reinforced even further as everywhere pots and pans were routinely taken away.

In the cities too the campaign was tough on ordinary people. In Nanjing one furnace alone set a record of 8.8 tonnes in a single day, but the fires had to be fed constantly and some teams went so hungry that they fainted by the smelters. Despite huge pressure, still people protested. Wang Manxiao simply refused to work more than eight hours a day. When challenged by a party secretary, Wang was defiant, asking point-blank, 'What are you going to do about it?' Others openly doubted that backyard furnaces would help to overtake Britain in steel production. Close to half of all the workers in some teams were described as 'backward', meaning that they shirked hard work.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, the leadership got its record, although much of it was slag, unwashed ore or mere statistical invention. Iron ingots from rural communes accumulated everywhere, too small and brittle to be used in modern rolling mills. According to a report from the Ministry of Metallurgy itself, in many provinces not even a third of the iron produced by backyard furnaces was usable. And the price tag was exorbitant. One tonne of iron from a backyard furnace was estimated to cost 300 to 350 yuan, twice the amount needed by a modern furnace, to which had to be added four tonnes of coal, three tonnes of iron ore and thirty to fifty working days.<sup>25</sup> The total losses from the iron-and-steel drive in 1958 were later estimated by the Bureau for Statistics at 5 billion yuan – not including damage to buildings, forests, mines and people.<sup>26</sup>

When Mikhail Klochko, a foreign adviser who had grown up in the Ukraine with its undulating and irregular fields, travelled to southern China in the autumn of 1958 he was taken aback by the bare, yellow patches of earth divided into narrow terraces: these were the fabled rice paddies, but hardly a single human being could be seen.<sup>27</sup>

Where were the farmers? Many were mobilised by the militia on backyard furnaces, some were deployed on large irrigation schemes, and others had left the village in search of work in the many factories chasing after ever higher targets. In total more than 15 million farmers moved to the city in 1958, lured by the prospect of a better life.<sup>28</sup> In Yunnan the number of industrial workers jumped from 124,000 in 1957 to 775,000, meaning that over half a million people were taken out of the countryside.<sup>29</sup> One-third of the entire workforce in the province was sent to work on water-conservancy projects at some point or another that year.<sup>30</sup> To put it differently, out of the 70,000 working adults in rural Jinning, Yunnan, 20,000 were deployed on irrigation schemes, 10,000 on building a railway, 10,000 in local factories, leaving only 30,000 to produce food.<sup>31</sup> But the figures masked another shift in patterns of work: as most of the men left the village, women had to work in the fields. Many had almost no experience in maintaining complex rice paddies, planting the seedlings unevenly and allowing weeds to invade the fields. In Yongren county a fifth of the crop rotted as a consequence.<sup>32</sup>

Up to a third of the time devoted to agriculture was lost,<sup>33</sup> but Mao and his colleagues believed that innovations such as deep ploughing and close cropping amply compensated for this shortfall. On the other hand, in the 'continuous revolution' hailed by the leadership, farmers were deployed along military lines, moving from the industrial field in the slack season back to the agricultural front during the harvest. As Xie Fuzhi put it, 'a continuous revolution means ceaselessly coming up with new tasks'.<sup>34</sup> But even as all available sources of manpower were mobilised in the harvesting campaign, from office clerks, students and teachers, factory workers and city dwellers to the armed forces, the situation on the ground was chaotic. Many of the farming tools had been destroyed in the iron and steel campaign, labour was still diverted to building dams, and

communal granaries in the people's communes were poorly managed. In Liantan, the model commune where a slogan praising the Great Leap Forward had been chiselled in the mountains to welcome an inspection team, several thousand farmers were conscripted to deep-plough seven hectares during the autumn harvest; as nobody was available to collect the crop, some 500 tonnes of grain were abandoned in the fields.<sup>35</sup>

But deliveries of grain to the state had to be made according to yields that local cadres had officially declared. The actual grain output for 1958 was just over 200 million tonnes, but on the basis of all the claims made about bumper crops the leadership estimated that it was close to 410 million tonnes. Punitive extractions based on entirely fictitious figures could only create fear and anger in the villages. The stage was set for a war on the people in which requisitions would plunge the country into the worst famine recorded in human history. Tan Zhenlin was blunt, addressing some of the leaders of South China in October 1958: 'You need to fight against the peasants . . . There is something ideologically wrong with you if you are afraid of coercion.'<sup>36</sup>

# Through the Valley of Death

## Warning Signs

People died of hunger even before the people's communes were introduced. As early as March 1958, at a party conference on grain, a number of delegates voiced their concern about food shortages as the farmers were taken from the fields to work on irrigation projects. Telltale signs of famine were gangs of people shuffling along dusty roads begging for food, leaving behind empty villages. Li Xiannian, minister of finance, swept these reservations aside and pressed ahead with grain targets.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of April hunger and want had spread across the country. In Guangxi one person in six was without food or money, and villagers died of hunger in parts of the province. In Shandong some 670,000 were starving, while 1.3 million were destitute in Anhui. In Hunan one in every ten farmers was out of grain for more than a month. Even in subtropical Guangdong close to a million people were hungry, the situation being particularly bad in Huiyang and Zhanjiang, where children were sold by starving villagers. In Hebei grain shortages were such that tens of thousands roamed the countryside in search of food; children were sold in Cangxian, Baoding and Handan. From the devastated villages 14,000 beggars made it to Tianjin, where they were put up in temporary shelters. In Gansu many villagers were reduced to eating tree bark; hundreds died of hunger.<sup>2</sup>

This was spring famine, and it could be explained as a temporary aberration, but in parts of the country hunger got worse over the summer. Such was the case in Luliang, Yunnan. We saw in an earlier chapter how as early as February 1958 forced labour on irrigation campaigns resulted in cases of starvation. But famine was not restricted to villagers conscripted to work on dams and reservoirs. In the township of Chahua, to take but one example, one in six villagers died between January and August 1958, amounting to a total of 1,610 people. Some were beaten to death, although most died of hunger and disease.<sup>3</sup> The county boss Chen Shengnian had been brought in to replace a party official purged for having been soft on grain requisitions in 1957. Chen encouraged the use of violence to impose strict discipline. Two out of three cadres in Chahua routinely resorted to corporal punishment, depriving villagers who were too weak to work of the right to eat.<sup>4</sup>

The problem was not confined to Luliang alone. Throughout the Qujing region in Yunnan people died of hunger. In Luliang some 13,000 were reported to have perished: thousands were also starving in Lunan, Luoping, Fuyuan, Shizong and other counties.<sup>5</sup> In Luxi county the local party committee inflated the crop as early as 1957, proclaiming that each farmer had some 300 kilos of grain a year when only half of that amount was available. After May 1958, starvation claimed some 12,000 lives, equivalent to one in every fourteen people. In some hamlets a fifth of all villagers were buried.<sup>6</sup>

How many died in the Qujing region is difficult to assess, but hidden in the archives is a set of population statistics which throw some light on the issue. They show that 82,000 people died in 1958, or 3.1 per cent of the population. The number of births declined dramatically, from 106,000 in 1957 to 59,000 in 1958. In the province as a whole, the death rate stood at 2.2 per cent, more than double the national average of 1 per cent for 1957.<sup>7</sup> Xie Fuzhi, the party boss in Yunnan, thought long and hard about Luliang and finally decided to report the losses to Mao in November 1958. The Chairman liked the report. Here, it seemed, was somebody he could rely on to tell him the truth. A year later Xie was promoted to head the Ministry of Security in Beijing. As to the deaths, Mao considered them to be a 'valuable lesson'.<sup>8</sup>

Another 'lesson' came from Xushui, a shrine of the Great Leap Forward where Mao had enjoined farmers to have five meals a day to get rid of the grain surplus. Behind the splendid façade of Xushui, Zhang Guozhong ran an elaborate labour camp which held 1.5 per cent of the local population, from recalcitrant farmers to party secretaries who failed to toe the line. Punishment inside the camp was brutal, ranging from flogging to naked exposure to the cold in the midst of winter. One hundred and twenty-four people died as a result; others were maimed or crippled for life. Outside the camp some 7,000 people were tied up, beaten, spat upon, paraded, forced to kneel or deprived of food, resulting in another 212 deaths.<sup>9</sup> Li Jiangsheng, the apparently affable head of the Dasigezhuang Brigade who had welcomed Mao and many other visitors to his showcase village, regularly beat farmers, some being hung up to freeze to death during the winter.<sup>10</sup> Despite all the violence, the crop yield was nowhere near what Zhang had promised. When Zhou Enlai passed through Hebei in December 1958, he

was approached by a humbled Zhang, who confided that Xushui had produced only 3,750 kilos per hectare, a far cry from the fifteen tonnes he had boasted over the summer. Xushui, in effect, was starving. Zhou promised to help.<sup>11</sup>

Much, but not all, of this came to light in a report written in October 1958 by the Office of Confidential Affairs at Mao's behest. Mao circulated the document to others in the central committee, writing at the bottom that 'these kinds of problems may not be restricted to one commune alone'.<sup>12</sup> But as Zhang Guozhong fell from grace, the Chairman embraced the county of Anguo, eighty kilometres south of Xushui, as a model instead. After listening to reports about farmers producing 2,300 kilos of grain a year each, he contemplated the output of Hebei province soaring from a mere 10 million tonnes in 1957 to 50 million by 1959.<sup>13</sup> When Hebei boss Liu Zihou warned Mao that some of these figures might be inflated, the Chairman brushed off these concerns and airily stated that errors were inevitable.<sup>14</sup>

Mao received numerous reports about hunger, disease and abuse from every corner of the country, whether personal letters mailed by courageous individuals, unsolicited complaints from local cadres or investigations undertaken on his behalf by security personnel or private secretaries. Xushui and Luliang are two telling examples; others will be invoked elsewhere in this book, while many more remain buried in the Central Archives in Beijing, closed to all but a few researchers hand-picked by the party.

By the end of 1958 Mao did make a few gestures to appease concern about widespread abuse on the ground. In the comments he circulated about the Luliang report, he accepted that the living conditions of villagers had been neglected at the expense of increased output. But to him Luliang was merely a 'lesson' that somehow magically 'immunised' the rest of the country against similar mistakes. In the case of Xushui, Mao simply switched his allegiance to the next county down the road willing to outdo others in extravagant production claims. As we will see in Chapter 11, Mao did slow down the pace of the Great Leap Forward between November 1958 and June 1959, but he was unwavering in his pursuit of utopia. The Great Leap Forward was a military campaign fought for a communist paradise in which future plenty for all would largely compensate for the present suffering of a few. Every war had its casualties, some battles would inevitably be lost, and a few ferocious clashes might exact a tragic toll that could have been avoided with the benefit of hindsight, but the campaign had to press on. As foreign minister Chen Yi put it in November 1958, addressing some of the human tragedies on the ground, 'casualties have indeed appeared among workers, but it is not enough to stop us in our tracks. This is a price we have to pay, it's nothing to be afraid of. Who knows how many people have been sacrificed on the battlefields and in the prisons [for the revolutionary cause]? Now we have a few cases of illness and death: it's nothing!'<sup>15</sup> Other leaders ignored the famine altogether. In Sichuan, in the grip of a terrible hunger in the winter of 1958–9, radical leader Li Jingquan enthused about the communes, noting that some villagers in Sichuan ate more meat than Mao Zedong, gaining several kilos in weight: 'Now what do you think of the communes? Is it a bad thing that people get fat?'<sup>16</sup>

For a party attuned to decades of guerrilla warfare, having survived the Long March after five campaigns of annihilation by the Guomindang in 1935, constant harassment from the Japanese army in the Second World War and a vicious civil war with massive casualties, a few losses were to be expected. Communism would not be achieved overnight. The year 1958 had been a blitzkrieg, an unrelenting assault on several fronts at once. The generals in command recognised that the footsoldiers needed some rest: 1959 was to be spent conducting more conventional guerrilla warfare. This meant, in a nutshell, that none of the key decisions about the Great Leap Forward was reversed.

Economics dictated that the pressure should be kept up in the early months of 1959. While Mao was concerned about cooling off the frenzy with which collectivisation had been pushed through, he was never given any reason to doubt that there had been an upsurge in agricultural production. In a joint report that was sent to him, the top economic planners Li Xiannian, Li Fuchun and Bo Yibo confirmed that 'when it comes to grain, cotton and edible oils, output has increased hugely compared to last year as a result of a Great Leap Forward in agricultural production, and we only need to carry out our work and earnestly resolve any problems that may arise in order to get ahead'.<sup>17</sup>

According to the planners, the biggest problem was that the countryside was not sending enough food to the cities. The amount of grain procured for the urban population, which had swollen to some 110 million people,



had increased by a quarter in the second half of 1958, reaching a total of 15 million tonnes.<sup>18</sup> But it was not enough. In December Peng Zhen, the bald and vigorous mayor of Beijing, rang the alarm bell, followed by central planner Li Fuchun. Nanning and Wuhan, he noted, had no more than a few weeks of reserves, while Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and the province of Liaoning had procured barely enough to last for another two months. At least 725,000 tonnes should have been stored in December, but a mere quarter of that amount had actually been delivered, with large shortages from provinces such as Hubei and Shanxi. All three cities, as well as Liaoning, were placed under special protection, and provinces that declared a surplus – Sichuan, Henan, Anhui, Shandong and Gansu – were required to transfer an extra total of 415,000 tonnes. Insufficient grain was not the only problem, as many cities did not get enough meat to last for more than a day or two, with provinces such as Gansu and Hunan remitting a mere fraction of the hogs required. Vegetables, fish and sugar were also tight.<sup>19</sup>

Not only were cities given a privileged status, but exports were granted top priority too. As we shall see next, China spent vast amounts of money buying foreign equipment in 1958. Then, in the euphoria of the autumn harvest, more orders were placed for 1959. As the bills were coming in, the reputation of the country hinged on its ability to meet foreign commitments. From the end of 1958 onwards, Zhou Enlai, with the support of his colleagues and the backing of the Chairman, relentlessly pressed the countryside into fulfilling ever greater procurements for the export market. To ensure that the cities were fed and foreign contracts were honoured, no retreat on the ground was possible.



## Shopping Spree

If the glittering path to communism was to be found in mobilising the masses, large quantities of industrial equipment and advanced technology were nonetheless required to help China transform itself from an agricultural country into an industrial giant. From the moment Mao returned from Moscow, where he had boasted that China would overtake Britain in fifteen years, Beijing started buying liberally from its foreign friends. Steel mills, cement kilns, glass factories, power stations, oil refineries: entire plants and equipment for heavy industry were purchased. Cranes, lorries, generators, motors, pumps, compressors, harvesters and combines, all were imported in unprecedented quantities. Deliveries of metal-cutting machine tools (not including complete factories) rose from 187 units in 1957 to 772 in 1958, planting and sowing machines from 429 units to 2,241, tractors from 67 units to 2,657, lorries from 212 units to 19,860.<sup>1</sup> Supplies of rolled ferrous metals, aluminium and other raw materials jumped, while the amount of transportation and communications equipment was also revised sharply upwards.

Most of this came from the Soviet Union, on which China had depended for economic and military help since May 1951, when the United Nations had imposed an embargo on strategic imports. Trade restrictions had been enforced after the United States had branded China an aggressor state in the Korean War. In the 1950s China signed a series of agreements with Moscow for the construction of more than 150 turnkey projects, to be built and handed over in a ready-to-use condition. In January 1958, in order to propel the Great Leap Forward, a further contract provided for an expansion of economic and military assistance. In August 1958 another forty-seven complete sets of equipment for industrial plants, to be built with Soviet technical aid, were agreed upon – in addition to some 200 already signed up to in earlier years. In February 1959 another agreement further widened economic and scientific co-operation, including thirty-one additional large industrial plants: this brought the number of industrial enterprises, factory shops and other plants to be installed to about 300.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1: Imports from the Soviet Union, with Major Commodity Groups and Items (million rubles)**

	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
China's imports from Soviet Union (total)	556	576	881	761	262	190
Trade	183	292	370	301	183	140
Petrol and petroleum products	(80)	(81)	(104)	(99)	(107)	(71)
Equipment for plants	245	174	310	283	55	9
Military equipment	121	78	79	72	12	11
New technology	7	31	122	104	12	30

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 6 Sept. 1963, 109-3321-2, pp. 66-7 and 88-9; although rates varied constantly, 1 ruble was roughly equivalent to 2.22 yuan and US\$1.1. Figures may not add up perfectly because of rounding.

Beijing also pressed Moscow for early delivery. In March 1958 military veteran Zhu De enjoined the Russians to hasten the completion of the two steel combines at Baotou and Wuhan.<sup>3</sup> A similar plea was made to S. F. Antonov, the Russian chargé d'affaires in Beijing, by one of Zhou Enlai's personal envoys in July.<sup>4</sup> Such was the pressure of the Great Leap Forward that entire branches of Soviet industry had to reorganise their production system in order to meet urgent demands and mounting orders for a whole array of commodities, often for delivery ahead of schedule.<sup>5</sup> Imports from the Soviet Union rose by an astounding 70 per cent in 1958 and 1959, as shown in Table 1. Where imports were 556 million rubles in 1957, by 1959 they stood at 881 million, of which some two-thirds consisted of machinery and equipment. China also relied on the Soviet Union for large imports of iron, steel and petrol. While Beijing depended on Moscow for half its oil, machine parts and heavy industrial equipment, a large proportion also came from other countries in the socialist bloc, East Germany in particular. In 1958 Walter Ulbricht agreed to build sugar refineries, cement factories, power plants and glassworks, sharply increasing the level of exports to China.<sup>6</sup> Imports from East Germany climbed to 120 million rubles, an amount which was followed by a further 100 million in 1959.<sup>7</sup>

But it was not merely the volume of imports which underwent drastic change during the Great Leap Forward. In pursuit of the best equipment to power its way to communism, Beijing dramatically changed the structure of

foreign trade with an overture to Western Europe, made possible by a gradual collapse of the embargo imposed by the United States. Washington was unable to maintain pressure on its allies, as Britain was keen to enter China's huge market and vigorously campaigned to eliminate the system of export controls from 1956 onwards. Purchases from Britain doubled from £12 million in 1957 to £27 million in 1958 and £24 million in 1959, while West German imports soared from DM 200 million in 1957 to DM 682 million in 1958 and DM 540 million in 1959.<sup>8</sup>

All of these imports were industrial in nature, but Mao was also dogged in his pursuit of the most advanced military equipment. Starting in 1957 the leadership in Beijing focused on extracting from Moscow as much military equipment and 'new technology' as possible. Zhou Enlai wrote to Khrushchev in June 1958 requesting aid in building a modern navy. Two months later, during the shelling of the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait, he asked for the latest technology in aerial surveillance. In May 1959 a purchase order was submitted to the Russians for strategic material related to 'defence and aviation equipment'. A reminder followed in September 1959, with Zhou Enlai pointing out that Beijing planned to spend a total of 165 million rubles in 1960 on Soviet military equipment.<sup>9</sup> Just how much Beijing spent has remained something of a mystery, since the published statistics perused by foreign observers did not include 'invisible' items such as military supplies. However, archives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs now provide a clear overview of imports from Moscow of both 'special goods', meaning military equipment, and 'new technology': as Table 1 shows, these two groups ballooned to over 200 million rubles in 1959, representing close to a quarter of China's imports from the Soviet Union.

China also had to discharge its debtor's obligations towards the Soviet Union. The amount lent by Moscow to Beijing between 1950 and 1962 stood at 1,407 million rubles.<sup>10</sup> Even before China dramatically increased loan repayments after the rift with the Soviet Union in the summer of 1960, the debt-service instalments must have amounted to more than 200 million rubles a year. China's limited foreign currency and gold reserves meant that both debt and actual imports had to be paid for in kind through exports, straining its limited resources. The basic trade pattern was the exchange of credit, capital goods and raw materials for rare minerals, manufactured goods and foodstuffs. Pork, for example, was bartered for cables, soybeans for aluminium, grain for steel rolls. Since the amount of rare metals such as antimony, tin and tungsten was limited, Beijing's shopping spree meant that more foodstuffs had to be extracted from the countryside to pay the bill (see Table 2). Over half of all exports to the Soviet Union consisted of agricultural commodities, ranging from fibres, tobacco, grain, soybeans, fresh fruit and edible oils to tinned meat. The value of the rice exported to Moscow alone trebled from 1957 to 1959, as Tables 2 and 3 indicate. The brunt of the imports, in other words, fell on the farmers.

Table 2: Exports to the Soviet Union: Major Commodity Groups (million rubles)

	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
China's exports to Soviet Union (total)	672	809	1006	737	483	441
Industry and mining	223	234	218	183	140	116
Farm and sideline processed products	227	346	460	386	304	296
Farm and sideline products	223	229	328	168	40	30

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 6 Sept. 1963, 109-3321-2, pp. 66-8; figures may not add up perfectly because of rounding.

Table 3: Exports of Grain and Edible Oils to the Soviet Union (thousand tonnes and million rubles)

	1957		1958		1959		1960		1961	
	value	weight	value	weight	value	weight	value	weight	value	weight
Grain	77	806	100	934	147	1418	66	640	1.2	12
Rice	(25)	(201)	(54)	(437)	(88)	(784)	(33)	(285)	(0.2)	(1.8)
Soybeans	(49)	(570)	(45)	(489)	(59)	(634)	(33)	(355)	(0.9)	(10.4)
Edible oils	24	57	23	72	28	78	15	41	0.4	0.4

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 6 Sept. 1963, 109-3321-2, pp. 70-1; figures may not add up perfectly because of rounding and selection of commodities.

Who was the architect of foreign trade in China? In a planned economy imports and exports were normally controlled by annual trade agreements, as the increase in external trade was designed to match the projected growth of the economy. There was thus a direct relationship between the rate of capital investment, the volume of foreign trade and the size of the harvests. The overall economic plan, agreed by the central leadership, determined the volume and structure of imports, which in turn set the level of exports from the country. Trade plans were prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which then delegated the import and export to

corporations dealing in a defined range of agricultural and industrial products.<sup>11</sup>

In the bureaucratic maze of communist China premier Zhou Enlai retained overall supervision of foreign trade. He was keen on enhanced economic relations with the rest of the world, not only the Soviet Union but also countries outside the communist bloc. Economic development, according to Zhou, could be achieved only with adequate capital, technology and expertise, all of which had to come from abroad. A close ally of Zhou Enlai, foreign trade minister Ye Jizhuang was also in favour of dramatically increased exports, which could be used to pay for imported machinery and industrial plants. But in 1957 Zhou reined in the enthusiasm of his delegate, sounding a cautious retreat in foreign trade. In October 1957 Ye had to explain to a foreign trade delegation that the population had suffered from the volume of food exports, in particular edible oils, which had led to serious shortages. Zhou Enlai had decided that the volume of trade with all countries would have to be cut in 1958.<sup>12</sup>

Zhou Enlai's gradual approach in economic planning jarred with Mao's vision of a bold Great Leap Forward. As we have seen, Mao angrily swept aside the reservations voiced by the premier, silencing his opponents at the Nanning conference in January 1958. Instead he leaned towards Zhu De. A military veteran of legendary reputation, Marshal Zhu De had joined forces with Mao back in 1928. Both came to rely on each other, Zhu providing military skills while Mao excelled at party politics. A wily politician himself, Zhu De knew how to lend support to the Chairman's vision of a jump forward into communism. In October 1957, he had already suggested that 'we must fight to expand exports and imports, so that we can gradually become a large importer and large exporter'. A few weeks later he argued that 'if we want to build socialism, we need to import technology, equipment, steel, and other necessary materials'.<sup>13</sup>

'Larger imports and larger exports', an idealistic policy that ran roughshod over the actual capacity of the country to export foodstuffs and materials, became a major catchphrase in 1958. It suited Mao, who could show off the success of his policies on the international stage. Once he had asserted his authority over his colleagues and silenced those who were critical of the Great Leap Forward, few leaders thought it wise to argue in favour of financial discipline. As the projected output of industry and agriculture was ceaselessly revised upwards, so the quantity of imports rose. In other words a tightening of foreign trade was feasible only once Mao recognised the failure of the Great Leap Forward. Politics was in command, and an overshoot in imports was seen not as a sign of budgetary indiscipline, but as an indication of boundless faith in the power of the masses to transform the economy. The purpose of spending on capital goods imported from abroad was to create the capacity to produce machinery and manufactured goods, catapulting the economy into a dramatically higher level of industrial development which would ultimately free China from its economic dependence on the Soviet Union.

Mao had few opponents at home. Abroad, in the Soviet bloc, leaders may have harboured doubts about the Great Leap Forward, but increased quantities of foodstuffs shipped from China suited them well. Khrushchev, after all, was shifting the emphasis in the Soviet economy away from heavy industry towards the needs of consumers, and defiantly promising to overtake the USA in per-capita production of meat, milk and butter. In East Germany Ulbricht was desperate to stop the flow of people who voted with their feet by escaping to West Germany. He, too, made extravagant claims, announcing at the Fifth Party Congress in 1958 that a socialist society was in the making, as the per-capita quantity of consumer goods would soon 'catch up and overtake' that of West Germany, a process envisaged to be completed by 1961.<sup>14</sup> In the meantime, he collectivised the countryside, causing severe food shortages which only increased reliance on imports from China. East German leaders may have had doubts about the size of the 1958 crop in China, but they were keen on more foodstuffs.<sup>15</sup> Not only did rice become a staple food in East Germany during the Great Leap Forward, but the margarine industry depended on imports of edible oils from China. Trade delegates pushed hard for greater imports of animal fodder, tobacco and peanuts.<sup>16</sup> Such was the pressure that in June 1959 a Chinese trade representative was forced to explain that the fodder exported for pigs in Germany was needed to feed people in China.<sup>17</sup>

China not only exported more to its Soviet-bloc allies, but also started dumping products in Asia and Africa. At the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution in Moscow, Khrushchev had triumphantly declared his intention to catch up with the United States in the production of farm products. He also announced a trade offensive. 'We declare war on you in the peaceful field of trade,' he threatened, starting a worldwide economic initiative designed to cripple US foreign trade and lure the economies of developing nations into the Soviet embrace. Russia sold tin, zinc and soybean products at prices nobody could match, and delivered lorries, cars and machinery in the Middle East at less than production cost – often with loans offering low interest rates and

preferential repayment terms.<sup>18</sup> In a planned economy which subordinated economics to politics, the Soviet Union could overpay for raw materials, ignore market prices and sustain heavy losses to win influence around the globe.

China was goaded into its own trade war, dumping goods as if they were all surplus to internal demand in the age of plenty brought about by the Great Leap Forward. Bicycles, sewing machines, thermos flasks, canned pork, fountain pens: all sorts of goods were sold below cost to demonstrate that the country was ahead of the Soviet Union in the race for true communism. In the British colony of Hong Kong, raincoats made in China sold for 40 per cent less than in Guangzhou.<sup>19</sup> Leather shoes went for US\$1.50 per pair, frozen quail for 8 cents each, violins for US\$5.<sup>20</sup>

But the main enemy in the economic war against imperialism was Japan, and China did its best to undercut its rival in soybean oil, cement, structural steel and window glass. Most of all, clothes became the battlefield where communist supremacy had to be asserted, as products from grey sheeting to cotton prints flooded the market. The cost of exporting goods below economic cost was enormous for a country living on the edge. In 1957 some 8.7 million bolts of cloth were exported for more than US\$50 million. In the first nine months of 1958 alone 9.2 million bolts found their way on to the international market, bringing in a mere US\$47 million, or 12 per cent less. By the end of the year, as poor farmers in the countryside were facing a winter without cotton-padded clothes, some 14 million bolts had been sold abroad below cost.<sup>21</sup> All that was done in order for China to be able to claim the title of the world's third largest exporter of cloth – instead of being fifth. As Ye Jizhuang acknowledged at a party conference on foreign trade at the end of 1958, flooding the market with goods below cost had been a disaster, as more had been sold than before but for far less revenue: 'we really hurt ourselves, we frightened our friends and we awakened our enemies'.<sup>22</sup>

'I hear that in the Ministry of Foreign Trade some people sign contracts in a very casual way. Who allowed you to export that much?' Zhou Enlai enquired, distancing himself from the scheme.

'We thought that we had a big cotton crop and would not encounter any problems so we did not ask for permission,' interjected Ma Yimin, an administrator from the Ministry of Foreign Trade.<sup>23</sup>

But neither the cotton crop nor the grain crop, nor, for that matter, industrial output, was anywhere near what had been pledged during the Great Leap Forward. China had a yawning trade deficit. Promised deliveries to socialist allies were not met. Only a third of an agreed 2,000 tonnes of frozen poultry had been handed over to East Germany in 1958, and Walter Ulbricht demanded the rest in time for Christmas. East Germany was owed some 5 to 7 million rubles, Hungary 1.3 million, Czechoslovakia 1.1 million, and all of them requested compensation in the shape of rice, peanuts or animal hides. Zhou agreed to free up an extra 15,000 tonnes of rice and 2,000 tonnes of peanuts for Hungary and Czechoslovakia. He also brushed aside Zhu De's policy of 'large imports, large exports'. Noting a shortfall of 400 million yuan in exports to the socialist bloc for 1958, he declared that 'we are against large imports and large exports, as foreign trade must be measured'.<sup>24</sup>

How should the shortfall be addressed? Zhou Enlai was the first to state in November 1958 that 'I would rather that we don't eat or eat less and consume less, as long as we honour contracts signed with foreigners.'<sup>25</sup> 'To take goods without anything in return is not in the style of socialism,' he added a few weeks later.<sup>26</sup> Deng Xiaoping chimed in: if everybody could just save a few eggs, a pound of meat, a pound of oil and six kilos of grain the entire export problem would simply vanish.<sup>27</sup> Li Xiannian, Li Fuchun and Bo Yibo agreed: 'In order to construct socialism and build a better future, people will agree to eat a little less if we explain the reasons'.<sup>28</sup>

In order to honour foreign obligations, exports for 1959 were substantially increased from 6.5 to 7.9 billion yuan, while imports grew only 3 per cent to 6.3 billion.<sup>29</sup> Grain earmarked for foreign markets, for instance, was doubled to 4 million tonnes.<sup>30</sup> Some readers may think that this was merely a few percentages of the total grain output, but in a poor country a few million tonnes made the difference between life and death. As Wang Renzhong bitterly pointed out in 1961, when the country was groping for a way out of the famine, Hubei province (of which he was leader) received 200,000 tonnes from Beijing to fight mass starvation in 1959, but the state exported more than 4 million tonnes the same year.<sup>31</sup>

The responsibility for reaching export targets was passed on to provincial leaders, each region being given a proportion of the national target. But in the winter of 1958–9 provincial bosses were confronted with growing shortfalls. By January 1959 a mere 80,000 tonnes of grain for export had been procured nationwide. The following month Hubei refused to provide more than 23,000 out of a planned 48,000, while Li Jingquan agreed to come up with two-thirds of Sichuan's quota, making up the rest in a variety of inferior grains. In Anhui Zeng Xisheng approved the delivery of only 5,000 out of a planned 23,500 tonnes. Fujian handed over nothing.<sup>32</sup> In



other export commodities too, most provinces met only half of their export quota, and regions such as Guizhou, Gansu and Qinghai slipped to below a third of their obligations.<sup>33</sup>

Complaints about non-delivery reached Beijing: hospitals and kindergartens in Leningrad, for instance, were out of rice in the middle of the winter.<sup>34</sup> As the issue of foreign trade slipped out of control, it was discussed at a party meeting in Shanghai in March–April 1959. Mao stepped in and recommended vegetarianism as a solution: 'We should save on clothing and food to guarantee exports, otherwise if 650 million people start eating a little more our export surplus will all be eaten up. Horses, cows, sheep, chicken, dogs, pigs: six of the farm animals don't eat meat, and aren't they all still alive? Some people don't eat meat either, old Xu didn't eat meat and he lived till he was eighty. I heard that Huang Yanpei didn't eat meat, he too lived to eighty. Can we pass a resolution that nobody should eat meat, and that all of it should be exported?'<sup>35</sup> Having heard the Chairman's command, Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, was willing to go even further, suggesting that the consumption of grain be cut as well in order to increase exports. Zhou Enlai, now emboldened, suggested that 'we should not eat any pork for three months so that we can guarantee meat exports'.<sup>36</sup> Besides meat, the use of edible oil was also curtailed. On 24 May 1959 an order was issued to all provinces: in the interests of the export market and the construction of socialism, no more edible oil should be sold in the countryside.<sup>37</sup>

But as the pressure to deliver increased, another problem appeared. Local units started cutting corners in order to meet their targets, leading to falling standards in the quality of exports. The Soviet Union lodged repeated complaints about the quality of meat, which was often contaminated by bacteria. Up to a third of the pork tins were rusty.<sup>38</sup> Grievances were filed about other goods as well: some 46,000 shoes sent to the Soviet Union had defects, paper exported to Hong Kong was unusable, batteries bought by Iraq were leaking, while the Swiss found that a fifth of the shipped coal consisted of stones. West Germany discovered salmonella in 500 tonnes of eggs, and in Morocco a third of all pumpkin seeds bought from the People's Republic were infested with insects.<sup>39</sup> The cost of replacing tainted merchandise delivered in 1959 amounted to 200 or 300 million yuan, while China also acquired a bad reputation abroad which would prove difficult to shake.<sup>40</sup>

Still unable to overcome the growing trade deficit, Beijing undertook emergency measures in October 1959. The State Council directed that all commodities which could be reduced or eliminated from domestic consumption be squeezed, while any remaining shortfalls should be replaced by other obtainable goods.<sup>41</sup> To back up the readjustment, a special Export Office was established to monitor both the quality and the quantity of all export commodities.<sup>42</sup> Trade agreements were made on a calendar basis, and the new arrangements were part of an end-of-year drive to ensure the completion of export targets. This meant that pressure was added just as the country was entering winter. The amount of pork, for instance, was below quota, and in November a campaign was organised to procure an extra 9 million pigs before the end of the year.<sup>43</sup>

As 1959 came to an end, ruthless extraction meant that 7.9 billion yuan had been exported, in line with Zhou Enlai's target. Grain and edible oil reached 1.7 billion yuan. Of the 4.2 million tonnes of grain exported that year, 1.42 went to the Soviet Union, a million to Eastern Europe and close to 1.6 million to 'capitalist countries'.<sup>44</sup> But despite all these efforts it was simply not enough. The trade deficit with Eastern Europe in 1958 and with the Soviet Union in 1959 alone amounted to 300 million yuan.<sup>45</sup> Tensions would come to a boil in the summer of 1960.

## Dizzy with Success

Mao had nudged, cajoled and bullied his colleagues into the Great Leap Forward, launching the country into a race to catch up with more developed countries through breakneck industrialisation and collectivisation of the countryside. Leaders who had been wary about the pace of economic development had been publicly degraded and humiliated, while on the ground those critical of the Leap had been swept away in a swirl of terror. Then, as the frenzy to come up with higher yields snowballed out of control and evidence about the damage on the ground accumulated, Mao turned around and started blaming everybody else for the disruptions that his campaign had created. A shrewd politician with an instinct for self-preservation honed by decades of political purges, he not only deflected the responsibility for the chaos on to the local party officials as well as his close colleagues, but also managed to portray himself as the benign leader concerned about the welfare of his subjects. During the process, which lasted from November 1958 to June 1959, the pressure temporarily abated, although the reprieve would turn out to be short-lived.

Misinformation proliferated in the political order entrenched by Mao. The Chairman was no fool, understanding all too well that the one-party system he had contributed to building could generate false reports and inflated statistics. In all communist regimes elaborate monitoring mechanisms existed to sidestep the official bureaucracy. Supreme leaders in particular had every interest in finding out about the problems which lower party officials preferred to keep to themselves, as failure to stay in touch could lead to a coup. Control organs supervised the formal workings of government bodies and party leaders, carrying out checks on finance, appointments, procedures and reporting. The state security, besides its usual tasks of preventing crime, running prisons and keeping the country safe, regularly surveyed popular opinion and gauged the extent of social discontent. In that capacity the minister of the Public Security Bureau was vital to Mao, and it is not surprising that he appointed Xie Fuzhi to the job in 1959: here, after all, was a leader who could be relied upon to tell the Chairman the truth. At all levels of the party machinery, confidential reports were regularly issued on a whole range of topics, although of course these too could be biased. These, in turn, could be bypassed by sending trusted officials on fact-finding missions. This is what Mao did in October 1958, also taking to the road himself to tackle the problems of the people's communes directly with leading cadres in the provinces. As evidence about statistical inflation mounted, he became increasingly worried. In Wuchang, confronted with a critical report in which his close ally Wang Renzhong showed that his province could produce 11 million tonnes of grain at most, instead of a projected 30 million tonnes, his confidence was dealt a blow and he became dejected.<sup>1</sup>

A lifeline was provided by Zhao Ziyang, the secretary of Guangdong province. In a report to his boss Tao Zhu, he revealed in January 1959 that many of the communes had hidden grain and hoarded cash. In a single county some 35,000 tonnes were uncovered.<sup>2</sup> Following up this clue, Zhao launched an anti-hiding campaign which turned up over a million tonnes of grain.<sup>3</sup> Tao Zhu praised the report and sent it to Mao.<sup>4</sup> Then came news from Anhui, under the leadership of radical Zeng Xisheng: 'The issue of so-called grain shortages in the countryside has nothing to do with lack of grain, nor is it linked to excessive state procurements: it is an ideological problem, in particular among local cadres.' The report went on to explain that team leaders on the ground had four apprehensions: namely, that the communes would not provide them with sufficient grain, that other teams might purposely fail to pull their weight and hide a part of the harvest, that excess grain might be confiscated in the case of a spring famine, and that heavier quotas would follow if they fully declared their true grain output.<sup>5</sup> Mao immediately circulated these reports, commenting that 'The problem of brigade leaders who hide grain and secretly divide it up is very serious. It worries the people and has an effect on the communist morality of local cadres, the spring crop, the enthusiasm for the Great Leap Forward in 1959 and the consolidation of the people's communes. The problem is widespread throughout the country and must be solved at once!'<sup>6</sup>

Mao took on the pose of a benevolent sage-king protective of the welfare of his subjects. The wind of communism had blown over the countryside, he explained. As overzealous cadres had taken collectivisation too far, randomly appropriating assets and labour in the name of the people's communes, the villagers had started to hide the grain. In March 1959 Mao even spoke with admiration for the strategies that the farmers adopted in

evading grain procurements, threatening that he might join them if the party did not change its ways.<sup>7</sup> 'I now support conservatism. I stand on the side of right deviation. I am against egalitarianism and left adventurism. I now represent 500 million peasants and 10 million local cadres. It is essential to be right opportunists, we must persist with right opportunism. If you don't all join me in going to the right, then I will be a rightist on my own, and alone will face expulsion from the party!'<sup>8</sup> Only Mao could have used the label 'rightist', which would have spelled political death for anybody else, so flippantly, as he postured as the lonely hero daring to speak truth to power. As to the local cadres whom he blamed for the excesses, 5 per cent should be purged. 'No need to shoot every one of them.'<sup>9</sup> A few months later Mao quietly increased the quota to 10 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

Mao also took his colleagues to task. The emperor, it seemed, had been misled by his close advisers: there was a bumper crop, but nothing like the fantastic claims made earlier in the campaign. Mao confronted the party bosses, repeatedly pouring scorn on outlandish predictions and demanding that projections for economic output be scaled back to more realistic levels. When a cautious Bo Yibo failed to cut back on industrial projects in March 1959, Mao was full of disdain. 'What kind of people are running our industry: the spoilt sons of a rich family! What we need in industry right now is a Qin emperor type. You people in industry are too soft, always talking about justice and virtue, so much so that as a result you accomplish nothing.'<sup>11</sup>

Particular blame was reserved for the close cronies who had so faithfully implemented his wishes. In front of the assembled leaders in Shanghai in April, Mao recollected: 'When I convened a small meeting at the Beidaihe conference in August nobody objected when we discussed the targets for 1959. At the time I was mainly busy with the shelling of Quemoy. The question of the people's communes was not really mine, it was Tan Zhenlin who was in charge – I just wrote a few lines.' About the resolution taken on the people's communes he had the following thoughts: 'That was somebody else's idea, not mine. I had a look at it but I didn't understand it, I just had a faint impression that communes are good.' Contributing to inflated targets were incomprehensible documents: 'We should forbid all these incomprehensible documents from leaving the room. You are university students, professors, great Confucian minds, I am merely an ordinary student, so you should write in plain language.' And in case anybody had any doubts about his leadership, he warned his colleagues: 'Some comrades still have not acknowledged that I am the leader . . . Many people hate me, in particular [defence minister] Peng Dehuai, he hates me to death . . . My policy with Peng Dehuai is as follows: if you don't attack me, I won't attack you, but if you attack me I for sure will attack you.' Then Mao launched into a rambling tirade in which every party leader who had disagreed with him in the past was mentioned by name, including Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Zhu De, Lin Biao, Peng Dehuai, Liu Bocheng, Chen Yi, even Ren Bishi, who had long since passed away. Every leader present was named, with the exception of Deng Xiaoping.<sup>12</sup> The point of the outburst was to show that Mao had been right all along, while those who had opposed him at one point or another in the party's past had all been wrong. Standing on the side of history, Mao was accountable to no one.

And no one was left in any doubt about the overall correctness of his line and the primacy of success. Mao never missed a chance to laud the Great Leap Forward: 'No matter how many problems we have, in the final analysis it does not amount to more than one finger out of ten.'<sup>13</sup> To mistake a tenth for the whole was an error. Even to think that a campaign of such a momentous nature could have been launched without making a single mistake was an error. To doubt the Great Leap Forward was an error, and to stand by and watch from a critical distance was an error.<sup>14</sup> Mao could not be swayed from his overall strategy.

In the first half of 1959 close cropping and deep ploughing continued unabated, irrigation schemes proceeded apace and collectivisation went ahead. In a moment of retrenchment following an all-out drive to collectivise the countryside, Stalin had allowed farmers to leave the collective farms after he published an article entitled 'Dizzy with Success' in 1930. Unlike his former patron, Mao did very little about the people's communes. He merely indicated that the brigade should be the basic accounting unit rather than the commune. Historians have interpreted this period as one of 'retreat' or 'cooling off', but this was simply not the case. Deng Xiaoping made this clear to the lieutenants on the battlefield in February 1959: 'We need to warm up, not cool down.'<sup>15</sup>

Requisitions from the countryside to feed the cities and satisfy foreign clients were drastically increased precisely during this period. In the top-secret minutes distributed only to participants of a meeting held in the Jinjiang Hotel in Shanghai on 25 March, Mao ordered that a third of all grain be procured, far above previous rates: 'If you don't go above a third, people won't rebel.' Regions that failed to fulfil their procurement quotas should be reported: 'This is not ruthless, it's realistic.' The country had a bumper harvest, and cadres should



study the example of Henan in raising procurements: 'he who strikes first prevails, he who strikes last fails'. Mao made an extra 16,000 lorries available to carry out the task. As to meat, he praised the decision taken by Hebei and Shandong to ban the consumption in the countryside for a period of three months: 'this is good, why can the whole country not do the same?' Edible oils should be extracted to the maximum. He brushed aside an interjection by a colleague suggesting that the state should guarantee eight metres of cloth per person a year: 'Who has ordered that?' And as we saw in the last chapter, Mao also reversed the priority given to the local market. Exports trumped local needs and had to be guaranteed: 'we should eat less'. A firm (zhujin) and ruthless (zhuahe) approach was warranted in times of war when confronting practical problems. 'When there is not enough to eat people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.'<sup>16</sup>

Mao's word was the law. But what was the meaning of some of his more obscure pronouncements, for instance 'he who strikes first prevails, he who strikes last fails'? Tan Zhenlin, put in charge of agriculture by the party's secretariat, clarified this in June 1959 in a telephone conference on procurements. He explained that the grain should be taken before the farmers could eat it: speed was of the essence, as each side tried to get to the crop first. 'But this saying of "he who strikes first prevails" should be used only by county and regional party secretaries; if it were used below that level it could easily lead to misunderstandings.'<sup>17</sup> Wang Renzhong, the man who had told Mao how cadres had inflated the crop figures, had the following recommendation: 'We will try peaceful means before we resort to force. If they still fail to comply with the state's unified planning, then we will apply the necessary measures, from a formal warning to dismissal or even removal from the party.'<sup>18</sup>

Signs of famine had appeared in 1958. In the first half of 1959 starvation became widespread, as villagers were hit by increased procurements ordered by the state. Even a zealot like Tan Zhenlin estimated that as early as January some 5 million people were suffering from famine oedema, 70,000 having starved to death. Zhou Enlai put the latter figure at 120,000. Both men were far below the mark, but had little incentive to investigate further.<sup>19</sup> Mao was aware of the famine but downplayed it by circulating reports showing that villagers in distressed regions were getting enough food, up to half a kilo a day in model province Henan.<sup>20</sup> On the ground local cadres were unsure how to respond, bewildered by the shifting and contradictory signals emerging from Beijing. At the top the leadership was taken aback by Mao's outburst in Shanghai: it was an omen of things to come.

## The End of Truth

A vast mountain range runs across the north of Jiangxi province with summits and craggy peaks rising 1,500 metres above sea level. Mount Lushan itself is an area of sedimentary rocks and limestone out of which gullies, gorges, caves and rock formations have been carved by water and wind, giving it a wild and rugged character much admired by visitors. Forests of fir, pine, camphor and cypress, clinging to cliffs and crevices, compete with waterfalls for attention, while temples and pagodas offer views as far as the sand dunes on the shores of the Boyang Lake down in the Yangzi valley. A temperate climate gives much-needed respite during the stifling heat of summer. Before the revolution Europeans also trekked to the region during the winter months to toboggan and ski. An English missionary first bought the Guling valley in 1895, and over the following decades several hundred bungalows, built of soft granite hauled up from the valley, turned Lushan into a sanatorium and summer residence for foreigners. Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the ruling Guomindang, acquired an attractive villa where he and his wife spent many summers in the 1930s. Mao reserved the place for himself, making sure that the name of Meilu Villa, carved into a stone by the Generalissimo himself, was preserved.

The Chairman opened the Lushan meeting on 2 July 1959. Party leaders referred to the gathering as a 'meeting of immortals'. Immortals lived far above mere humans, seated on the clouds of heaven, playfully gliding through the mist, unencumbered by earthly restraints. Mao wanted his colleagues to feel free to talk about any topic they wanted, and he had in mind eighteen initial points for discussion. But he had overheard critical comments made by defence minister Peng Dehuai that very day and added a nineteenth point to his agenda: party unity.<sup>1</sup> He set the tone by praising the achievements of the Great Leap Forward and lauding the enthusiasm and energy of the Chinese people.

One way for Mao to find out what party leaders thought about the Leap was to have them discuss problems in small groups divided geographically: each reviewed issues specific to their own regional area for a week, while the Chairman retained overall oversight by being the only one to be given a daily report about each group's meetings. Despite his suspicion that Peng Dehuai might be up to something, Mao seemed at first in good spirits, full of plans to visit the rock caves, Buddhist temples and many Confucian landmarks for which Lushan was so famous. The local leadership also organised evening entertainment with music and dance troupes performing in a former Catholic church, which was invariably followed by dancing parties at which Mao found himself surrounded by several young nurses. Mao would entertain them in his room, tightly protected by special security.<sup>2</sup>

Mao did not intervene, but was briefed by the reports submitted by reliable provincial bosses on how each group approached the question of the Great Leap Forward. Many of the conference participants believed that the Lushan gathering would push further for economic reform, as problems with the Great Leap Forward had already been discussed at previous meetings and some measures had been taken to tackle a situation sliding out of control. As the days went by, the absence of any intervention by the Chairman and the intimacy of a small group setting lured some leaders into talking more and more openly about starvation, bogus production figures and cadre abuses in the countryside. Peng Dehuai, assigned to the north-west group, was outspoken, on several occasions blaming Mao for the direction of the Great Leap Forward: 'We all have a share of responsibility, including Mao Zedong. The steel target of 10.7 million tonnes was set by Chairman Mao, so how could he escape responsibility?'<sup>3</sup> But silence from the Chairman was not approval, and Mao was becoming increasingly upset as the limits within which he thought discussion would take place were being ignored and some leaders started focusing not only on the failures of collectivisation but also on his personal role in them.

Mao spoke again on 10 July, convening a meeting of the regional leaders and arguing that the achievements of the past year far exceeded the failures. He used the metaphor consecrated at the Nanning meeting in January 1958: 'Doesn't everybody have ten fingers? We can count nine of those fingers as achievements, and only one as a failure.' The party could resolve its problems, but only through unity and shared ideology. The general line, he said, was completely correct. Liu Shaoqi chimed in by explaining that the few problems that had appeared were the result of a lack of experience: was there not always a tuition fee to be paid for valuable lessons? Zhou Enlai added that the party was quick in discovering problems and expert in solving them. The

Chairman concluded: 'The situation in general is excellent. There are many problems, but our future is bright!'<sup>4</sup>

Silence followed Mao's speech. But not everybody was willing to fall in line. Defence minister Peng Dehuai was well known for being stubborn. When Peng had gone back to his home in Xiangtan, Hunan, the same region where Mao had grown up, he found abuse and suffering everywhere, from farmers forced to practise close cropping to cadres tearing down houses in the iron and steel campaign. Visiting a retirement home and a kindergarten, he saw nothing but misery, the children in rags and the elderly crouched on bamboo mats in the freezing winter. Even after his visit he continued receiving letters from his home town about widespread starvation.<sup>5</sup> Peng felt strongly about what he had witnessed in the countryside, and had high hopes of addressing the failures of the Great Leap in Lushan. He now feared that the meeting would turn into a mere formality in which out of deference to Mao the subject of the famine would be skirted.<sup>6</sup> None of the leaders, he believed, had the courage to speak out: Liu Shaoqi had just become head of state, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun had been silenced a year earlier, Zhu De had few critical ideas, Marshal Lin Biao was in poor health and had a limited understanding of the problems, while Deng Xiaoping was reluctant to voice any criticism.<sup>7</sup> He decided to write to Mao instead, dropping off a long letter at his lodging as the Chairman was asleep on 14 July.

With the body of a bull and the face of a bulldog, a stout man with a shaven head, Peng Dehuai was known for being a leader who did not hesitate to speak his mind openly to Mao.<sup>8</sup> Mao and Peng went back to the early days of guerrilla fighting in Jinggangshan, but had clashed on several occasions, notably during the Korean War when an incensed Peng had stormed past a guard into Mao's bedroom to confront the Chairman about military strategy. The Chairman disliked the old marshal intensely.

Peng's letter of opinion started like a memorial: 'I am a simple man and indeed I am crude and lack tact. For this reason, whether this letter is of value or not is for you to decide. Please correct me wherever I am wrong.' Peng was careful to give due praise to the accomplishments of the Great Leap Forward, as agricultural and industrial production had soared while the backyard furnaces had brought new technical skills to the peasants. Peng even predicted that Britain would be overtaken in a mere four years. Whatever problems had appeared, he wrote, were due to a poor understanding of the Chairman's ideas. In the second part of his letter Peng insisted that the party could learn from the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward: these included considerable waste of natural resources and manpower, inflated production claims and leftist tendencies.

His letter was balanced and prudent, all the more so in light of what was to come in the following days, yet it managed to incense Mao. Peng's mention of 'petty-bourgeois fanaticism leading to leftist errors' had touched a raw nerve in the Chairman. Just as offensive was an ironic statement according to which 'dealing with economic construction does not come quite as easily as bombing Quemoy or dealing with Tibet'.<sup>9</sup>

According to his doctor, Mao did not sleep all night. Two days later he called a politburo standing committee in his villa, receiving the leaders in a bathrobe and slippers.<sup>10</sup> Rightists elements outside the party had attacked the Great Leap Forward, Mao explained, and now people from within the ranks were undermining the movement as well, claiming that it had done more harm than good. Peng Dehuai was one such person, and his letter was to be distributed to all 150 participants at the Lushan meeting for discussion in small groups. He then asked Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai to call in reinforcements from Beijing: Peng Zhen, Chen Yi, Huang Kecheng and others were to join the meeting as soon as possible.<sup>11</sup>

Most senior cadres by now understood how serious the situation had become and spoke out against Peng. Zhang Zhongliang, the Gansu leader, claimed that the successes in his province illustrated the wisdom of the Great Leap Forward. Tao Zhu, Wang Renzhong and Chen Zhengren, all of whom had a stake in the Leap, also agreed.<sup>12</sup> But several did not. Huang Kecheng, army chief of staff, arriving the following day from Beijing, unexpectedly spoke in favour of Peng Dehuai. As Huang would admit in the weeks to come, he had been unable to sleep because of the scale of starvation in the countryside.<sup>13</sup> Tan Zhenlin, who could always be counted on, exploded: 'Have you eaten dog meat [meaning, are you hot in the head]? Are you suffering from fever? All this nonsense! You should know that we asked you to come to Lushan to help us out.'<sup>14</sup> Others wavered too. Zhou Xiaozhou, the first party secretary of Hunan province, praised the letter, although he agreed that it contained a few barbs. The turning point was a bombshell dropped by Zhang Wentian in a stunning attack on Mao and the Great Leap Forward on 21 July.

Zhang Wentian had defied Mao's leadership in the early 1930s as a member of the opposing faction, but later rallied to the Chairman's cause. As vice-minister of foreign affairs he carried considerable weight, and Mao could only see his support of Peng as an alliance between the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>15</sup> Zhang spoke for several hours on 21 July, despite frequent heckling from Mao's supporters. Contrary to

established party rituals, he brushed aside the achievements in a short opening paragraph and stormed straight into a close examination of the problems caused by the Great Leap Forward. Targets were far too high, claims about the crop were bogus, and as a consequence people were dying of hunger. The cost of the backyard furnaces was 5 billion yuan, to say nothing of a crop lost because peasants were too busy smelting iron to collect the harvest from the fields. Zhang denounced slogans such as 'Let All the People Smelt Steel' as absurd. Stoppages in production were frequent. Foreigners complained about the low quality of products made in China, damaging the country's reputation. Most of all, the Great Leap Forward had made no difference in the countryside: 'Our country is "poor and blank", and the socialist system gives us the conditions to change this rapidly, but we are still "poor and blank"'. Mao encouraged leaders to pull the emperor off his horse, Zhang conceded, yet nobody dared to speak out for fear of losing his head. In conclusion, he inverted Mao's metaphor of ten fingers: 'The shortcomings outweigh the achievements by a factor of nine to one.'<sup>16</sup>

Mao must have wondered whether this was a concerted attack on his leadership. Peng Dehuai commanded the army, Zhou Xiaozhou headed a province, Zhang Wentian was in foreign affairs. Could there be more opponents hiding in the background? Peng had been assigned to the north-west group on account of his experience of Gansu province, which he had toured in the previous months, and both Peng and Zhang repeatedly discussed the problems that had appeared in that part of the country.<sup>17</sup> As the Lushan meeting was unfolding, a coup took place in Gansu province. After Zhang Zhongliang, the man in charge of Gansu, had left Lanzhou to attend the Lushan meeting, the provincial party committee was swayed by his rival Huo Weide. On 15 July they sent an urgent letter to the centre announcing that thousands had died of hunger and that over 1.5 million farmers were suffering from a famine raging across half a dozen counties. The chief responsible for this famine was Zhang Zhongliang, who as leader of the province had ratified inflated crop figures, increased state procurements, condoned cadre abuses on the ground and failed to act when starvation had appeared in April 1959. Before Mao's own eyes, in the middle of the Lushan meeting, one of his most zealous followers was thus being undermined by a provincial party committee.<sup>18</sup>

More bad news reached Mao. In April Peng Dehuai had visited Eastern Europe on a goodwill tour, briefly meeting with Khrushchev in Albania. Shortly after his return, during a debriefing session with Mao, Peng Dehuai uttered a clumsy remark which made the Chairman's face turn red: several dozen leaders close to Tito, he observed, had fled to Albania. Tito was the ruthless leader of Yugoslavia who had dared to oppose Stalin, alienating some of his close supporters. Mao must have interpreted the comment as a veiled criticism of his own rule.<sup>19</sup> A few weeks later, on 20 June, the Soviet leadership reneged on its agreement to help China develop nuclear weapons.

Then on 18 July Khrushchev publicly condemned the communes while visiting the Polish town of Poznań. He accused those who had pressed for communes in Russia in the 1920s of having a poor understanding of what communism was and how it should be built. The initial release of his speech on Polish radio did not mention the communes, but a few days later a full version was printed in Pravda, which to close observers could only look like a carefully planned attack on Mao. A translation in Chinese appeared a few days later in a newsletter reserved for the Beijing leadership,<sup>20</sup> but already on 19 July Mao circulated a report compiled by the embassy in Moscow showing how some Soviet cadres openly discussed the fact that people were dying of hunger in China as a result of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>21</sup> Could there be collusion between enemies within the party and revisionists abroad? Was it a coincidence that Khrushchev made his speech precisely when both Peng Dehuai and Zhang Wentian were attacking the Great Leap Forward?

Ke Qingshi, the party boss in Shanghai, was so incensed by Zhang Wentian's talk that he approached Mao and urged him to take on his enemies then and there. Li Jingquan also spoke with Mao. Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai conferred with the Chairman on the evening of 22 July, although the details of what was said that evening are not known.<sup>22</sup> In a rather disingenuous but clever way that implicated Liu Shaoqi, Mao would claim a few weeks later that he had been puzzled by requests for greater freedom of speech by some comrades: Liu was the one who had pointed out to him that these were not isolated voices but a faction fighting the party line.<sup>23</sup>

On 23 July Mao gave a long and rambling speech lasting three hours in which obscure metaphors were mixed with blunt threats aimed at frightening his opponents. He opened his speech thus: 'You have spoken at great length, so how about you allow me to say a few words – what do you think?' He then rebutted Peng Dehuai's letter, reviewed all the attacks on the party since its foundation and cautioned leaders not to waver in a moment of crisis – some comrades were a mere thirty kilometres away from being rightists. He repeated the threat he had made at a party meeting three months earlier: 'If you don't attack me, I won't attack you, but if



you attack me I for sure will attack you.' If every little problem in every brigade was to be reported in the People's Daily at the expense of any other news, he said, it would take at least a year to appear in print. And what would be the result? The country would collapse, the leadership would be overthrown. 'If we deserve to perish, I will go to the countryside to lead the peasants and overthrow the government. If the People's Liberation Army won't follow me, I will then go to find a Red Army. But I think that the Liberation Army will follow me.' Mao admitted overall responsibility for the Great Leap Forward, but he also implicated a string of colleagues, from Ke Qingshi, the Shanghai boss who had first proposed a steel campaign, Li Fuchun who was in charge of overall planning, Tan Zhenlin and Lu Liaoyan who together oversaw agriculture, to the provincial leaders he labelled leftist, whether the province be Yunnan, Henan, Sichuan or Hubei. Mao delivered an ultimatum: leaders would have to choose between Peng and himself, and the wrong choice would bring about enormous political consequences for the party.<sup>24</sup>

His audience was shell-shocked. As Mao walked out with his doctor, he bumped into Peng Dehuai. 'Minister Peng, let's have a talk,' Mao suggested.

Peng Dehuai was livid. 'There's nothing to talk about. No more talk,' he answered, cutting through the air by bringing down his right hand in a chopping motion.<sup>25</sup>

On 2 August, Mao opened the plenum of the central committee in a short but fierce speech which set the tone for the following two weeks. 'When we first arrived in Lushan there was something in the air, as some people said that there was no freedom to speak openly, there was pressure. At the time I did not quite understand what this was all about. I could not make head or tail of it and did not see why they said there was not enough freedom. Indeed, the first two weeks felt like a meeting of immortals and there was no tension. Only later did it become tense, as some people wanted freedom of speech. Tension appeared because they wanted the freedom to criticise the general line, freedom to destroy the general line. They criticised what we did last year, and they criticised this year's work, saying that everything we did last year was bad, fundamentally bad . . . What problems do we have now? Today, the only problem is the rightist opportunists launching a furious attack on the party, the people and the great and dynamic socialist enterprise.' Mao warned his colleagues that there was a stark choice to be made. 'You either want unity or you want to split the party.'<sup>26</sup>

The following week small working groups were charged with grilling Peng Dehuai, Zhang Wentian, Huang Kecheng, Zhou Xiaozhou and others on every detail of their plot against the party. In a series of tense confrontations and cross-examinations, the 'anti-party clique' had to subject themselves to ever more detailed self-criticisms in which every aspect of their pasts, their meetings and their talks was scrutinised. Allegations about famine had cast a shadow over provincial bosses such as Li Jingquan, Zeng Xisheng, Wang Renzhong and Zhang Zhongliang, and they needed no encouragement to attack the men who had undermined their credibility. Lin Biao proved just as ferocious. A gaunt, balding general who had destroyed the best Guomindang divisions in Manchuria in the civil war, Lin had been quietly promoted by Mao to one of the vice-chairmanships of the party a few months earlier. Suffering from all sorts of phobias about water, wind and cold, he often called in sick, living a mole-like existence, but at Lushan he rallied to the Chairman's defence, accusing Peng Dehuai of being overly 'ambitious, conspiratorial and hypocritical'. In his shrill voice he crowed that 'Only Mao is a great hero, a role to which no one else should dare to aspire. We all lag very far behind him, so don't even think about it!'<sup>27</sup>

Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai also had their parts to play. Both had a lot to lose, and either one could be blamed for what had gone wrong in the country if Mao decided to retreat. Liu Shaoqi had enthusiastically backed the Great Leap Forward and been rewarded for his loyalty with a promotion to head of state in April. He also viewed himself as the potential inheritor of the party's leadership and had no desire to rock the boat. After Mao's outburst Liu became so nervous that he increased his use of sleeping tablets. At one point he overdosed and collapsed in the toilet.<sup>28</sup> But he pulled himself together, and on 17 August, the last day of the meeting, he gave a display of fawning flattery, extolling Mao's many qualities.<sup>29</sup>

Zhou Enlai, as premier, had been involved in the day-to-day running of the country and would have had to account for the disastrous turn of events if Peng Dehuai had had his way. He also had personal reasons to feel threatened by the old marshal. Huang Kecheng, during one of the grilling sessions, revealed that years earlier Peng had described Zhou as a weak politician who should step down from all important posts.<sup>30</sup> But most of all Zhou backed Mao because he had made a decision long ago never to cross the Chairman: loyalty to Mao, as he had discovered over decades of fierce political infighting, was the key to staying in power. His position had

already been weakened after Mao's withering attack on him at Nanning over a year ago and he had no desire to incur the Chairman's wrath again. Mao was thus the centre of an uneasy coalition of leaders who felt threatened by Peng Dehuai. Without their support the Chairman might not have prevailed.

As the meetings progressed and the criticisms escalated, the men who had spoken out against Mao were gradually broken down until full confessions were obtained. Peng admitted that his letter and the comments he had made in the early sessions were not isolated incidents, but 'anti-party, anti-people, anti-socialist mistakes of a rightist opportunist nature'.<sup>[31](#)</sup>

Mao spoke again on 11 August, singling out Peng Dehuai: 'You said that at the North China meeting I fucked your mother for forty days, and here at Lushan you only fucked my mother for twenty days, so I still owe you twenty days. Now we indulge your desire, and I even added five days on top of the forty we have had so far so that you can insult us as much as you want, otherwise we would owe you.' In the more standard jargon of socialism, Mao claimed that Peng and his supporters were 'bourgeois democrats' who had little in common with the proletarian socialist revolution, thereby stripping them of their positions and casting them into the ranks of the bourgeoisie.<sup>[32](#)</sup>

At the closing meeting of the conference five days later a resolution was adopted in which Mao's opponents were found guilty of having conspired against party, state and people.<sup>[33](#)</sup> The next few months would unleash a nationwide witch-hunt against 'rightist' elements.

## Repression

The army was purged. Lin Biao, who could be depended on to ferret out any ideological opposition among the military, was rewarded for his performance at Lushan with Peng Dehuai's job. Lin knew that speaking the truth about conditions in the countryside was a naive approach bound to fail, and he showered the Chairman with flattery instead. But in private he was much more critical than Peng, confiding in his private diary – unearthed by Red Guards years later – that the Great Leap Forward was 'based on fantasy, and a total mess'.<sup>1</sup> Rarely was the distance between a leader's inner thoughts and his public statements so vast, but all over the country party officials scrambled to prove their allegiance to the Chairman and the Great Leap Forward as a new purge unfolded.

The tone was set at the top. In language auguring the Cultural Revolution, Peng Zhen beat the drum for a purge of the ranks: 'The struggle should be profound, and should be carried out according to our principles, whether it is against old comrades-in-arms, colleagues or even husbands and wives.' Tan Zhenlin, the zealous vice-premier overseeing agriculture, pointed out that enemies were entrenched at the very top: 'this struggle should separate us from some of our old comrades-in-arms!'<sup>2</sup> In Beijing alone thousands of top officials were targeted by the end of 1959, including almost 300 up to the level of central committee member, or 10 per cent of the top echelon. More than sixty were branded as rightists. Many were old veterans, but as the leadership explained they had to be smashed resolutely or else the 'construction of socialism' would be imperilled.<sup>3</sup>

Across the country anybody who had expressed reservations about the Great Leap Forward was hunted down. In Gansu this struggle started as soon as Zhang Zhongliang returned to Lanzhou. Huo Weide, Song Liangcheng and others who had 'shot a poisoned arrow at Lushan' were denounced as members of an 'anti-party clique'. Well over 10,000 cadres were hounded throughout the province.<sup>4</sup> Where his rivals had revealed widespread famine in a letter of denunciation to Beijing, Zhang wrote instead to the Chairman: 'Work in every department is surging ahead in our province, the changes are momentous, including those concerning grain. We are looking at a bumper harvest across the province.'<sup>5</sup> Then, as his realm turned into a living hell in 1960, he wrote again to explain deaths by starvation, blaming them on Huo Weide, the leader of the anti-party clique. Zhang minimised what would later be revealed to be death on a massive scale by again calling it a problem of 'one finger out of ten'.<sup>6</sup>

Anybody who had stood in the path of the Great Leap Forward was removed. In Yunnan, the deputy of the Bureau for Commerce was dismissed for having made critical comments about food shortages and the people's communes – and for having snored while recordings of the Chairman's speeches were being played.<sup>7</sup> In Hebei, the vice-director of the Bureau for Water Conservancy was purged for having expressed doubts about the wisdom of dismantling central-heating systems during the steel campaign.<sup>8</sup> County leaders who had started to close some of the canteens were persecuted for abandoning socialism and 'reverting to a go-it-alone policy'.<sup>9</sup> In Anhui vice-governor Zhang Kaifan and some of his allies were sacked, as Mao suspected that 'such people are speculators who sneaked into the party . . . They scheme to sabotage the proletarian dictatorship, split the party and organise factions.'<sup>10</sup> Similar high-level dismissals also occurred in Fujian, Qinghai, Heilongjiang and Liaoning, among other provinces.

Provincial leaders who had managed to soften the impact of the Great Leap Forward were removed. Under constant fire from Mao and his acolytes for his caution, Zhou Xiaozhou, the reluctant leader of Hunan province, had relented and inflated the crop projections in 1958. But he rarely lost an opportunity to put a damper on the enthusiasm of local cadres during inspection trips. In Changde he had openly scoffed at all the bragging about grain output. He questioned the supply system. Approached by a woman who complained about the local canteen, he had suggested that she simply walk out and cook a meal back home. He had refused point-blank to have anybody in Hunan follow the example set by Macheng, seeing the sputnik fields as a dangerous diversion from pressing agricultural tasks. In Ningxiang, where he had discovered that only women were working in the fields, he had demanded that the menfolk be recalled from the backyard furnaces. His response to the work-study programme requiring all students in primary schools to participate in productive labour had been a mere



expletive: 'Rubbish!'<sup>11</sup> Despite his best efforts, many local cadres had forged ahead, embracing the Leap Forward through a mixture of conviction and ambition, leading to the same kind of abuses on the ground as could be found elsewhere.

But, all in all, Hunan was in better shape than its neighbour Hubei, run by Mao's sycophant Wang Renzhong. When Mao's special train had stopped in Wuchang in May 1959, just before the Lushan meeting, the city was in a terrible state. Even in the guesthouse set aside for Mao, there was no meat, no cigarettes and few vegetables. Changsha, in Mao's home province of Hunan, was different, with open-air restaurants still serving customers. Zhou Xiaozhou was all too conscious of the contrast, prodding his rival Wang, who was accompanying Mao to Changsha: 'Hunan was criticised for not having worked as hard. Now look at Hubei. You don't even have stale cigarettes or tea. You used up all your reserves last year. Today, we may be poor, but at least we have supplies in storage.'<sup>12</sup> With hindsight, maybe Zhou had made too many enemies to survive in the fierce environment of a one-party regime. As a key member of the 'anti-party clique' he was purged immediately after the Lushan plenum, paving the way for leaders like Zhang Pinghua who were willing to follow Mao's every dictate – and starve the local population as a result.

Whatever remnants of reason had managed to survive the folly of the Great Leap Forward were swept aside in a frenzied witch-hunt which left farmers more vulnerable than ever to the naked power of the party. At every level – province, county, commune, brigade – ferocious purges were carried out, replacing lacklustre cadres with hard, unscrupulous elements who trimmed their sails to benefit from the radical winds blowing from Beijing. In 1959–60 some 3.6 million party members were labelled or purged as rightists, although total membership surged from 13,960,000 in 1959 to 17,380,000 in 1961.<sup>13</sup> In a moral universe in which the means justified the ends, many would be prepared to become the Chairman's willing instruments, casting aside every idea about right and wrong to achieve the ends he envisaged. Had the leadership reversed course in the summer of 1959 at Lushan, the number of victims claimed by famine would have been counted in the millions. Instead, as the country plunged into catastrophe, tens of millions of lives would be extinguished through exhaustion, illness, torture and hunger. War on the people was about to take on a wholly new dimension as the leadership looked away, finding in the growing rift with the Soviet Union a perfect pretext to turn a blind eye to what was happening on the ground.

## The Sino-Soviet Rift

Mikhail Klochko received his recall telegram on 16 July 1960. Together with some 1,500 Soviet advisers and 2,500 dependants, he was ordered to pack up and leave by his embassy in Beijing. His hosts were courteous to the last, having been instructed to provide every assistance possible – as well as to obtain, by any means possible, all the technical information that the Russians had not already handed over.<sup>1</sup> At a banquet for the departing advisers, foreign minister Chen Yi thanked them warmly for their immense help and wished them good health. On a more sour note, a Soviet delegate complained, 'We've done so much for you, and you are not content.'<sup>2</sup>

After Mao had initiated an international crisis by shelling Quemoy and Matsu two years earlier, Khrushchev started to reconsider his offer to deliver a sample atom bomb to China. Nuclear disarmament talks between the Soviet Union and the United States prompted him to delay honouring his pledge, and in June 1959 he finally reneged on his promise altogether.<sup>3</sup> In late September 1959, at a summit between the USA and the Soviet Union, Khrushchev agreed to a reduction of 1 million in the total number of Soviet troops, seeking a further rapprochement with the United States. Relations further deteriorated when Khrushchev visited Beijing a few months later to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic. The Soviet delegation clashed with their hosts over a series of issues, including a border dispute between China and India, as Moscow attempted to act as an intermediary between the two countries instead of backing its ally Beijing. In the spring of 1960, Beijing started openly to challenge Moscow for the right to lead the socialist camp, denouncing Khrushchev in increasingly vituperative terms for his 'revisionism' and his pursuit of 'appeasement with imperialists'.<sup>4</sup> Angered, the Soviet leader retaliated by pulling all Soviet advisers out of China.<sup>5</sup>

The withdrawal came as a blow to Mao. It led to the collapse of economic relations between the two countries, the cancellation of scores of large-scale projects and a freeze in high-end military technology transfers. As Jung Chang and Jon Halliday point out in *Mao: The Unknown Story*, the population should have benefited from these cancellations, as less food would now have to be exported to pay for expensive projects.<sup>6</sup> But where the agreements allowed for repayments to be made over sixteen years, Mao insisted on settling up ahead of schedule: 'Times were really tough in Yan'an [during the war], we ate hot peppers and nobody died, and now that things are much better than in those days, we want to fasten our belts and try to pay the money back within five years.'<sup>7</sup> On 5 August 1960, even before the departure of all Soviet specialists was completed, provincial leaders were warned by phone that the country was not exporting enough, as it was heading towards a deficit in the balance of payments of 2 billion yuan. Every effort had to be made to honour the Soviet debt within two years, and this had to be done by increasing exports of grain, cotton and edible oils as much as possible.<sup>8</sup>

The true scale of early repayments to the Soviet Union has only just come to light with the opening of the archives in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, where an army of accountants kept detailed records of how shifting exchange rates, the changing gold content of the ruble, re-negotiations of trade agreements and the calculation of interest rates affected repayments to the Soviet Union. They show that Moscow lent some 968.6 million rubles to Beijing between 1950 and 1955 (not including interest). By the time of the recall of Soviet experts some 430.3 million rubles were still owed.<sup>9</sup> But as a consequence of the trade deficit further loans were contracted during the following years, and by the end of 1962 the total owed by Beijing stood at 1,407 million rubles (1,275 million in loans plus interest estimated at 132 million). Some 1,269 million of this was amortised by 1962.<sup>10</sup> In other words, while the total debt increased from 968 to 1,407 million rubles, China managed to pay off roughly half a billion between 1960 and 1962, as tens of millions of Chinese died of famine. It may be that this amount was actually smaller, as the figure provided for 1960 did not include interest, which was presumably repaid on top of capital, but even if we allow for a correction of 10 per cent the fact remains that large sums of money were paid to the Soviet Union. In 1960 some 160 million rubles were sent to clear part of the debt, while in 1962 about 172 million rubles were returned (the figure for 1961 is missing but is likely to be similar).<sup>11</sup> Large amounts of exports were also used to amortise the debt, meaning that by the end of 1962

China owed the Soviet Union only 138 million rubles: China insisted on paying 97 million in 1963, clearing the debt by 1965.<sup>12</sup>

But the Russians never asked for an accelerated repayment. On the contrary, they agreed in April 1961 that 288 million rubles in unpaid balances should be refinanced as a new credit, with the payments taking place over four years, the first in 1962 being no more than 8 million.<sup>13</sup> As the moratorium on the trade deficit worked like an unplanned loan, it actually meant that China was given more economic aid by the Soviet Union than any other country had received during a single year to date.<sup>14</sup>

The real damage done to the economy by the recall of all experts was minor, since few civilian specialists worked in agriculture. And even if some industrial projects were delayed by the withdrawal of foreign expertise, the economy, at this stage, was already in deep trouble. But Mao conveniently blamed the Soviet Union for China's economic collapse, starting one of the most enduring myths about the famine, namely that hunger was caused by Soviet pressure to pay back the debts. Already in November 1960 China invoked natural catastrophes as well as the immense damage done to the entire economy by the Soviet recall to explain delays in the delivery of foodstuffs to East Germany.<sup>15</sup> In 1964, Mikhail Suslov, the chief ideologue in foreign policy in Moscow, noted that China blamed the Soviet Union for the famine.<sup>16</sup> To this day, when ordinary people who survived the famine are asked what, in their opinion, caused mass starvation, the answer almost invariably points to the Soviet Union. This is how a farmer from Shajing, near the Hong Kong border, explained the famine in a recent interview: 'The government owed the Soviet Union a huge sum of money and needed to repay the loans. A very huge sum of loans. So all the produce in the country had to be submitted. All the livestock and the grain had to be given out to the government to repay the loans to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union forced China to repay the loans.'<sup>17</sup>

Did the recall of foreign advisers hasten the adoption of policies in China designed to tackle the famine? Few observers, at the time or to this day, see it in that light. Khrushchev is roundly blamed for having shot himself in the foot: overnight the Soviet leader threw away whatever leverage he had over China. Especially scathing of their leader were Russian diplomats serving in Beijing at the time, for instance Stepan Chervonenko and Lev Deliusin, who relished their country's 'special relationship' with China – and hence their own positions as intermediaries between the countries.<sup>18</sup> Khrushchev himself certainly had no such goal in mind. He probably expected a humbled China to come back to the table to renegotiate in terms more amenable to the Soviet Union. But whether he intended to do so or not, Khrushchev's move did contribute to isolating Mao further, hitting him just when reports were coming in from all parts of the country about the effects of mass starvation. In fact, Mao became so depressed in the summer of 1960 that he took to his bed, seemingly incapable of confronting adverse news.<sup>19</sup> He was in retreat, trying to find a way out of the impasse.

## Capitalist Grain

Almost immediately after the recall of Soviet experts in July 1960, a triumvirate consisting of Zhou Enlai, Li Fuchun and Li Xiannian was put in charge of foreign trade.<sup>1</sup> Their answer to Khrushchev's action was to move the trade structure away from the Soviet Union towards the West. By the end of August, minister of foreign trade Ye Jizhuang instructed his representatives abroad to reduce imports from the socialist bloc. All negotiations for new trade agreements were to cease, with the exception of a few strategic projects such as steel from the Soviet Union for the Nanjing bridge. No new import contracts were to be signed, on the pretext that the price or specifications of the goods on offer were not satisfactory.<sup>2</sup> Some foreign observers at the time talked about a ruthless blockade of China by the socialist camp,<sup>3</sup> but the uncoupling of the economy from the Soviet Union and its allies was entirely initiated by Beijing.

However, China could not fob off former trade partners with quibbles about inadequate specifications for ever. By December 1960, with Mao in retreat, a more plausible explanation was finally offered. The official version was that China was suffering from unprecedented natural catastrophes which had ravaged a great deal of the countryside, and no more foodstuffs could be exported to the Soviet Union. All trade with the socialist camp had to be reduced, with the exception of Albania.<sup>4</sup> Besides deflecting attention away from the man-made dimensions of the famine, invoking the force of nature had a further advantage. Trade agreements usually carried a standard escape clause, Article 33, stipulating that in the event of unforeseen circumstances beyond human control, part or all of the contract could be terminated.<sup>5</sup> Article 33 was now to be used not only to decrease trade but to cancel a whole series of agreements.<sup>6</sup>

The statistical tables presented in Chapter 10 show that exports to the Soviet Union fell from 761 million rubles in 1960 to 262 million the following year. A similar drop marked imports from Eastern Europe. Only when all arrears with trading partners had been cleared could trade agreements for 1961 be contemplated, Ye Jizhuang explained to his partners in East Berlin.<sup>7</sup> But not only had East Germany become used to rice, it was also dependent on China for edible oils. So large was the shortfall that Walter Ulbricht was forced to turn to Khrushchev for help in August 1961.

China moved away from the socialist bloc not as punishment for the withdrawal of Soviet experts but because it was bankrupt. The best gauge of the country's financial worthiness was the value of the yuan on the black market. It began a spectacular decline in 1960. Then, in January 1961, as news of food shortages leaked out to the rest of the world, it nosedived to an all-time low at about US\$0.75 per ten yuan, or about one-sixth of the money's official value. Overall, by June 1961 it had dropped 50 per cent in value from the previous year.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the yuan's decline was caused by the need to raise hard currency to pay for grain on international markets. One way of coping with starvation had been to move grain from surplus areas to famished regions, but by the autumn of 1960, as another crop failure worsened the famine, this strategy had very little effect. Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun managed to convince Mao that grain had to be imported from capitalist countries. How they did this remains unclear, but they probably sold the idea by portraying imports of grain as a way to boost exports for cash. The first contracts were negotiated in Hong Kong at the end of 1960.<sup>9</sup> Close to 6 million tonnes of grain were purchased in 1960–1 at a cost of US\$367 million (see Table 4). Terms of payment varied: the Canadians asked for 25 per cent down in convertible sterling while the Australians allowed 10 per cent upfront and granted credit on the remainder. But all in all about half had to be paid in 1961.<sup>10</sup>

Table 4: Imports of Grain by China in 1961

Exporting country	Million tonnes
Argentina	0.045
Australia	2.74
Burma	0.3
Canada	2.34
France	0.285
Germany	0.250
total	5.96

Source: BArch, Berlin, 1962, DL2-VAN-175, p. 15; see also Allan J. Barry, 'The Chinese Food Purchases', *China Quarterly*, no. 8 (Oct.-Dec. 1961), p. 21.

In order to meet these commitments China had to earn a surplus in transferable currency, and this could be done only by cutting imports of capital goods and increasing exports to the non-communist world. Throughout the famine thus far Zhou Enlai had made sure that deliveries of eggs and meat reached Hong Kong every single day.<sup>11</sup> Now, in the autumn of 1960, despite protests from a disgruntled Khrushchev who complained about lack of deliveries to the Soviet Union, he decided to redirect all available foodstuffs towards Hong Kong, greatly increasing trade with the crown colony.<sup>12</sup> Cotton and textile products too left for Hong Kong, jumping from HK\$217.3 million in 1959 to HK\$287 million the following year.<sup>13</sup> All in all, Hong Kong was the largest source of foreign currency earned during the famine, producing some US\$320 million a year.<sup>14</sup> As in 1958, Asian markets were also swamped with cheap goods. Textiles, for instance, were dumped at prices competitors like India and Japan could not possibly match, even when these goods were badly needed on the mainland.

Beijing also emptied its reserves, sending silver bars to London. China became an exporter of bullion by the end of 1960, shipping some 50 to 60 million troy ounces in 1961, of which 46 million, valued at £15.5 million, were taken by Britain.<sup>15</sup> In total, if we are to rely on a report by Zhou Enlai, some US\$150 million was raised through selling gold and silver by the end of 1961.<sup>16</sup> In a desperate attempt to raise more foreign currency, China also started a grim trade in sympathy by which overseas Chinese could buy special coupons in exchange for cash in Hong Kong banks: these coupons could then be sent to hungry relatives across the border, to be exchanged for grain and blankets.<sup>17</sup>

Why did China not import grain from its socialist allies? Pride and fear were the main obstacles. As we have seen, the leadership never hesitated to place the reputation of the country above the needs of the population, plundering the countryside to meet export agreements entered into with foreign partners. However, pride often does come before the proverbial fall, and in March 1961 Zhou Enlai had to execute a humiliating climbdown, explaining to his trading allies that China was no longer in a position to export foodstuffs, to meet its long-term trade agreements or to honour a number of contracts for large industrial plants. Over a million tonnes in grain and edible oils were still outstanding to the Soviet Union for the year 1960 alone, and China would not be able to catch up with food shipments in the near future. As Zhou put it diplomatically, how could his country possibly ask for grain when it had failed its socialist allies so badly?<sup>18</sup>

Beijing also feared that a request for help might be turned down by Moscow, since the entire Great Leap Forward had been designed to show up the Soviet Union. This fear was probably justified, although initially Moscow displayed goodwill. The Russians, for instance, offered to deliver a million tonnes of grain and half a million tonnes of sugar on an exchange basis, free of interest, the cost to be reimbursed over several years. Beijing turned down the grain but took the sugar.<sup>19</sup> Khrushchev repeated his offer of grain during a meeting with Ye Jizhuang at the Kremlin in April 1961. He had every sympathy for China's predicament, he told the minister of foreign trade, all the more so since the Ukraine had suffered a terrible famine in 1946. In a crude and rather thoughtless reminder which could only cause offence, he added that there had even been cases of cannibalism. Then he changed the topic of the conversation, casually mentioning that the Soviet Union was about to overtake the United States in steel production. Ye Jizhuang politely declined the offer.<sup>20</sup>

A few months later, as the famine failed to vanish with the arrival of summer, Zhou Enlai approached the Russians again. At a meeting with a delegation from Moscow in August 1961, he explained why, for the first time in the history of the People's Republic, grain was being imported from the imperialist camp. Then Zhou, in a rather roundabout manner, enquired about the Soviet Union's willingness to trade 2 million tonnes of grain against soybeans, bristles and tin, possibly even rice. Only a third would be paid upfront, the rest would follow over the next two years. Coming just after the delegation had baulked at a trade deficit of 70 million rubles, the



timing of the request was poor. 'Do you have any foreign currency?' the Soviet side asked bluntly, forcing Zhou to admit that China had none, and that it was selling silver.<sup>21</sup> The delegation left the issue hanging in the air, and nothing further happened for several months, till finally someone dropped a hint by telling Deng Xiaoping that the Soviet Union was experiencing difficulties and was not in a position to help. The loss of face for China must have been tremendous.<sup>22</sup>

Delaying tactics in the midst of calamity were also adopted by Moscow when Zhou Enlai asked for an extra 20,000 tonnes of petrol in July 1961: Khrushchev waited for four months until after the Twenty-Second Soviet Party Congress before acceding to Beijing's request.<sup>23</sup> Political leverage was also extracted from a swap of grain agreed upon in June 1961. Out of all the wheat Beijing purchased from Canada, 280,000 tonnes were earmarked for the Soviet Union, which in turn exported a similar amount to China. After the wheat had been shipped directly to Russia from Canada, the Soviets acted as if the import came from North America, at the same time listing their export of grain to China in the published trade statistics for the year 1961. In the eyes of the world, with foreign experts raking over published statistics for signs of a rift between the two socialist giants, it looked as if the Soviet Union was feeding China.<sup>24</sup>

Not all of the grain purchased abroad was intended for home consumption. The rice bought from Burma, for instance, was shipped directly to Ceylon to meet outstanding commitments. Some 160,000 tonnes also found their way to East Germany to address the trade deficit with socialist allies. And China, in the midst of famine, continued to be generous to its friends. Two cargoes of wheat carrying some 60,000 tonnes were shipped directly to Tirana from Canadian ports as a gift. Since Albania had a population of about 1.4 million, this amount provided as much as one-fifth of domestic requirements.<sup>25</sup> Pupo Shyti, Tirana's chief negotiator in Beijing, later recalled that he could see the signs of famine in Beijing, but 'the Chinese gave us everything . . . When we needed anything we just asked the Chinese . . . I felt ashamed.'<sup>26</sup> Other countries, aside from Albania, also received rice for free at the height of the famine, for instance Guinea, the recipient of 10,000 tonnes in 1961.<sup>27</sup>

China never ceased to cultivate its international image with liberal aid and cheap loans to developing nations in Asia and Africa. One reason why Beijing increased foreign donations during the Great Leap Forward was to prove that it had discovered the bridge to a communist future. But the main consideration was rivalry with Moscow. In an age of decolonisation, Khrushchev had started competing for the allegiance of developing nations, trying to draw them away from the United States into the Soviet orbit by lavishing aid on prestige projects such as dams and stadiums. Mao wanted to challenge him for leadership in Asia and Africa. Dismissive of the Kremlin's notion of 'peaceful evolution', on which relations with the developing world were premised, he encouraged instead a militant theory of revolution, aiding communist revolutionaries in such countries as Algeria, Cameroon, Kenya and Uganda in determined competition with Moscow.

How much help was given in times of famine? Overall, China provided 4 billion yuan to foreign countries from 1950 to July 1960, of which 2.8 billion was free economic aid and 1.2 billion came as interest-free or low-interest loans.<sup>28</sup> Most of this was granted from 1958 onwards. In 1960, as a new body called the Foreign Economic Liaison Bureau with ministerial rank was created to cope with increased donations, aid to foreign countries was fixed at 420 million yuan.<sup>29</sup> The following year, as Beijing refused new loans or even deferment of payments offered by socialist allies aware of China's predicament, some 660 million yuan was slated for foreign aid.<sup>30</sup> The beneficiaries included Burma at US\$84 million and Cambodia at US\$11.2 million, while Vietnam was granted 142 million rubles and Albania 112.5 million rubles.<sup>31</sup> These sums were made available as the overall income of the state shrank by 45 per cent to 35 billion yuan, cuts having been made in a number of areas, including 1.4 billion in health and education.<sup>32</sup>

Such generosity meant that on the ground, where people were starving, grain was still being exported in 1960, some of it for free. In fact, with a policy of 'export above all else' (chukou diyi?), just about every province had to export more than ever before. Hunan was instructed to export goods to the value of 423 million yuan, or 3.4 per cent of the total output value of the province, the produce to be exported including 300,000 tonnes of rice and 270,000 pigs.<sup>33</sup>

In the five months following Zhou Enlai's decision in August 1960 to curb the export of food to the socialist camp, well over 100,000 tonnes of grain were procured in Guangdong and sent to Cuba, Indonesia, Poland and Vietnam, representing about a quarter of the 470,000 tonnes requisitioned in the province during that period. As provincial boss Tao Zhu explained after formal diplomatic relations were established with Fidel Castro's regime

in September 1960, delivering grain to the people of Cuba, besieged by American imperialism, was a matter of 'international reputation'.<sup>34</sup> Factory workers in Guangzhou were less enthusiastic about selfless assistance to the developing world: already bitter about the lack of cotton, exported and put on sale in the department stores of Hong Kong, they openly wondered: 'why export to Cuba when we don't have enough to eat?'<sup>35</sup> Even in places as far away as Gansu, villagers protested that they had to go hungry because Mao was shipping rice to Cuba.<sup>36</sup> At a party gathering in Beidaihe, the following month, the leadership decided to send Castro a further 100,000 tonnes of rice worth 26 million yuan in exchange for sugar.<sup>37</sup>

Could China have accepted aid instead of spending all its foreign currency on grain imports? President John Kennedy, apparently, noted coolly that Beijing was still exporting food to Africa and Cuba even in a time of famine, adding that 'we've had no indication from the Chinese Communists that they would welcome any offer of food'.<sup>38</sup> The Red Cross did try to assist, but approached Beijing in a blundering way by first enquiring about famine in Tibet – where a major rebellion had just been squashed by the People's Liberation Army. The response was swift and predictable. The country had witnessed an unprecedentedly rich harvest in 1960, there was absolutely no famine and rumours to the contrary were slanderous. Adding fuel to the fire, Henrik Beer, clumsy secretary general of the League of Red Cross Societies, then sent a second telegram from Geneva asking whether this was true as well for China. A furious reply followed from Beijing, pointing out that Tibet and China were not separate entities but constituted one country, throughout which the government relied on the many advantages of the people's communes to overcome the natural calamities of the previous two years.<sup>39</sup>

But even had the Red Cross broached the issue in a more tactful way, it is very likely that foreign help would have been refused. When the Japanese foreign minister had a quiet word with his counterpart, Chen Yi, about a discreet gift of 100,000 tonnes of wheat, to be shipped out of the public view, he was rebuffed.<sup>40</sup> Even gifts of clothes by schoolchildren in East Berlin, offered to help typhoon-ravaged Guangdong in 1959, were seen as a loss of face, and embassies were told to accept no further donations.<sup>41</sup> China was willing to patronise the developing world but would accept help from nobody.



## Finding a Way Out

Faced with a bankrupt economy, Zhou Enlai, Li Fuchun and Li Xiannian, the triumvirate in charge of foreign trade, began in August 1960 to move the trade structure away from the Soviet Union towards the West. In the following months Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun managed to convince Mao that imports of grain were needed to get the economy back on its feet after the agricultural losses attributed to natural disasters. The party planners also started quietly masterminding a turnaround by tinkering, ever so prudently, with policy guidelines. Li Fuchun initiated work on a new motto that emphasised 'adjustment' instead of great leaps forward in August 1960. In a one-party state where government by slogan held sway, the very notion of adjustment would have been unthinkable only six months earlier. Zhou Enlai warily added the term 'consolidation' to make it more palatable to Mao.<sup>1</sup> Li Fuchun would have to navigate carefully to get the new mantra past a mercurial Chairman.

Then, on 21 October 1960, a report from the Ministry of Supervision landed on Li Fuchun's desk. It was about mass starvation in Xinyang, a region in Wu Zhipu's model province of Henan. Where an earlier investigation had mentioned 18,000 deaths in the county of Zhengyang alone, now the figure had quadrupled to 80,000 deaths. In Suiping, the seat of the hallowed Chayashan commune, one in ten villagers had starved to death.<sup>2</sup>

When Li Fuchun handed over the report to Mao Zedong three days later, the Chairman was visibly shaken: here were counter-revolutionaries who had seized control of an entire region, carrying out horrific acts of revenge against class enemies. After an urgent meeting with Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, a team was dispatched under the leadership of Li Xiannian, who was joined en route by Tao Zhu and Wang Renzhong.

In Xinyang they found a nightmare. In Guangshan county, ground zero of the famine, they were met by quiet sobs of despair from famished survivors, huddled in the bitter cold among the rubble of their destroyed homes, surrounded by barren fields marked by graves. The hearths were stone cold, as everything from doors, windows and lintels to the straw roofs had been ripped out for fuel. The food was gone. In a reign of terror after the Lushan plenum, the local militias had rampaged through the villages searching for hidden grain, confiscating everything to make up for the shortfall in output. In a hamlet once humming with activity, two children with drumstick limbs and skeletal heads, lying by their cadaverous grandmother, were the only survivors.<sup>3</sup> One in four people in a local population of half a million had perished in Guangshan.<sup>4</sup> Mass graves were dug. Ten infants, still breathing, had been thrown into the frozen ground in Chengguan.<sup>5</sup> In total in 1960 over a million people died in the Xinyang region. Of these victims 67,000 were clubbed to death with sticks.<sup>6</sup> Li Xiannian cried: 'The defeat of the Western Route Army was so cruel yet I did not shed a tear, but after seeing such horror in Guangshan even I am unable to control myself.'<sup>7</sup>

'Bad people have seized power, causing beatings, deaths, grain shortages and hunger. The democratic revolution has not been completed, as feudal forces, full of hatred towards socialism, are stirring up trouble, sabotaging socialist productive forces': Mao could no longer deny the extent of the disaster, but as a paranoid leader who saw the world in terms of plots and conspiracies, he blamed the trouble on class enemies.<sup>8</sup> Rich farmers and counter-revolutionary elements had taken advantage of the anti-rightist campaign to worm their way back into power and carry out acts of class revenge. At no point did the Chairman acknowledge that the regime of terror he modelled at the top was being mirrored at every level down the party hierarchy.

Mao ordered power to be taken back. Across the country a campaign unfolded to root out 'class enemies', often backed by powerful delegations sent by Beijing. Li Xiannian and Wang Renzhong supervised a purge in Henan in which county leaders were overthrown and thousands of cadres investigated, some arrested on the spot.<sup>9</sup> A general with a forty-man team was dispatched by Beijing to clean up the militia.<sup>10</sup> In Gansu a delegation sent by the Ministry of Inspection led by Qian Ying oversaw a major purge, which resulted in the downgrading of Zhang Zhongliang to third secretary of the provincial party committee. Other regions followed, as one urgent order after another pressed for an overthrow of 'abusive cadres' in the people's communes. On 3 November 1960 an emergency directive was finally issued allowing villagers to keep private plots, engage in side occupations, rest for eight hours a day and restore local markets, among other measures designed to weaken the power of the communes over villagers.<sup>11</sup>

It was the beginning of the end of mass starvation. Sensing a change in the wind, Li Fuchun pushed through his policy of economic adjustment for the year 1961.<sup>12</sup> He had been the first planner to back Mao in the launch of the Great Leap Forward. Now he was the first one to backtrack, prudently steering a policy of economic revival past the Chairman.

At this stage Liu Shaoqi was still looking from the sidelines. He shared the Chairman's view that the countryside had become a breeding ground for counter-revolution. Like other leaders, he had preferred to ignore what happened on the ground after the confrontation at Lushan, and instead devoted much of his energy to stridently denouncing the revisionist path taken by the Soviet Union. He was not oblivious to the famine. Malnourishment was evident even inside the vermilion walls of Zhongnanhai, the compound which served as the headquarters of the party in Beijing. Meat, eggs and cooking oil were scarce, and famine oedema and hepatitis were endemic.<sup>13</sup> But it was politically safer to interpret the signs of starvation as the result of environmental disasters. On 20 January 1961, Liu Shaoqi harangued an audience from Gansu about the dangers of feudalism, which had led to the calamity witnessed in Xinyang: 'This is a revolution: the key is in mobilising the masses. We should mobilise the masses and allow them to free themselves.'<sup>14</sup>

Only days before, Mao had voiced his surprise at the extent of the bourgeois backlash in the countryside: 'Who would have thought that the countryside harboured so many counter-revolutionaries? We did not expect that the counter-revolution would usurp power at the village level and carry out cruel acts of class revenge.'<sup>15</sup> Instead of relying on the reports from the grass-roots which, Mao claimed, had obviously misled the leadership, the Chairman decided to dispatch several high-powered teams to investigate the countryside. Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and Peng Zhen were all sent off to visit communes around Beijing. Mao himself spent several weeks in Hunan. In the hope that farmers would speak to him without inhibition, Liu Shaoqi headed back to his home in Huaminglou, Hunan. It would be a revelatory experience with far-reaching repercussions.

Determined to avoid the large retinue of bodyguards and local officials that inevitably came with every visit from a top dignitary, Liu set off on 2 April 1961 from Changsha, travelling in two jeeps in the company of his wife and a few close assistants, bowl and chopsticks tucked away in light luggage, ready for a spartan regime in the countryside. Soon the convoy came across a sign announcing a giant pig farm. On closer inspection, it turned out that the farm consisted of no more than a dozen scrawny hogs foraging in the mud. Liu decided to spend the night in the fodder store, and his escorts combed the place in vain for some rice straw to soften the plank beds. Liu noted that even the dried human excrement piled up for fertiliser consisted of nothing but rough fibre, another telltale sign of widespread want. Nearby a few children in rags were digging for wild herbs.<sup>16</sup>

Liu Shaoqi's fears were confirmed over the following weeks, however difficult it was to get wary farmers to tell the truth. In one village where he stopped on his way home, he found that the number of deaths had been covered up by local leaders, while an official report drew a picture of everyday life which had nothing to do with the destitution Liu saw on the ground. He clashed with the local boss, who tried to steer the team away from speaking with villagers. He tracked down a cadre who had been dismissed as a rightist in 1959: Duan Shucheng spoke up, explaining how the brigade had earned a red flag during the Great Leap Forward. To protect their privileged status, Duan explained, local leaders had systematically persecuted anybody who dared to voice a dissenting view. In 1960 a meagre crop of 360 tonnes of grain was talked up to 600 tonnes. After requisitions villagers were left with a paltry 180 kilos, out of which seed and fodder had to be taken, leaving a handful of rice a day.<sup>17</sup>

In his home village Tanzichong, friends and relatives were less reluctant to speak out. They denied that there had been a drought the year before, blaming cadres instead for the food shortages: 'Man-made disasters are the main reason, not natural calamities.' In the canteen cooking utensils, dirty bowls and chopsticks were tossed in a pile on the floor. A few asparagus leaves were the only vegetable available, to be prepared without cooking oil. Liu was shaken by what he saw. A few days later, he apologised to his fellow villagers in a mass meeting: 'I haven't returned home for nearly forty years. I really wanted to come home for a visit. Now I have seen how bitter your lives are. We have not done our jobs well, and we beg for your pardon.' That very evening the canteen was dissolved on Liu's orders.<sup>18</sup>

A committed party man, Liu Shaoqi was genuinely shocked by the disastrous state in which he found his home village. He had dedicated his every waking moment to the party, only to find that it had brought widespread abuse, destitution and starvation to the people he was meant to serve. What he also discovered was a

complete lack of connection between people and party: he had been deliberately kept in the dark – or so he claimed.

While the details of his trip to the countryside are well known, his clash with the local officials is not. Liu first deflected blame on to party boss Zhang Pinghua, who had taken charge of the province after Zhou Xiaozhou's fall from power: 'My home town is in such a mess but nobody has sent me a report, not even a single letter or a complaint. In the past people used to send me letters, then it all stopped. I don't think that they didn't want to write, or refused to write, I am afraid that they simply were not allowed to write, or they did write and their letters were inspected and confiscated.' With the provincial Bureau for Public Security he was blunt, accusing the security apparatus of being 'completely rotten'. How could the local police be allowed to check and retain personal letters, and how could they get away with investigating and beating people for trying to bring local malpractices to his attention? Later Liu confronted Xie Fuzhi, the powerful minister of public security and close ally of Mao, asking him why abuse was allowed to go on unchecked in his home town. Gone was the patient party builder Liu: here was a man shaken in his faith who had promised to speak out on behalf of his fellow villagers.<sup>19</sup>

Back in Beijing Liu continued to speak his mind. On 31 May 1961, at a gathering of leaders, he made an emotional speech in which he bluntly placed the blame for the famine on the shoulders of the party. 'Are the problems that have appeared over the past few years actually due to natural disasters or to shortcomings and errors we have made in our work? In Hunan the peasants have a saying that "30 per cent is due to natural calamities, 70 per cent to man-made disasters." ' Liu dismissed the attempt to gloss over the scale of the calamity by dogmatically insisting that the overall policy of the party was a great success, touching a raw nerve by debunking one of Mao's favourite aphorisms: 'Some comrades say that these problems are merely one finger out of ten. But right now I am afraid that this is no longer a matter of one out of ten. We always say nine fingers versus one finger: the proportion never changes, but this doesn't quite fit the actual reality. We should be realistic and talk about things as they are.' About the party line he did not mince his words. 'In carrying out the party line, in organising the people's communes, in organising work for the Great Leap Forward, there have been many weaknesses and errors, even very serious weaknesses and errors.' And he was in no doubt as to where the responsibility lay. 'The centre is the principal culprit, we leaders are all responsible, let's not blame one department or one person alone.'<sup>20</sup>

Liu was parting company with Mao. He got away with his blistering critique because the horror, by now, was so evident everywhere that it could no longer be brushed aside. He would pay dearly for his challenge during the Cultural Revolution, but for the time being other leaders cautiously leaned towards the head of state, ever so slightly inflecting the balance of power away from Mao. Zhou Enlai, always circumspect, acknowledged some of the errors made in the wake of the Lushan plenum, and then, to help the Chairman save face, openly accepted blame for everything that had gone wrong.<sup>21</sup>

Liu Shaoqi took a chance by pushing the limits for critical debate, but Li Fuchun was the one who used the shift to engineer a strategic retreat away from the Great Leap Forward. A bookish man with self-effacing airs, he had been wary of putting forward dissenting views, but he too changed his tone, delivering a trenchant assessment of the economy at a meeting of party planners in Beidaihe in July 1961. Only a few months earlier, attentive to the moods of the Chairman, he had smoothed over widespread shortages, claiming that a socialist economy never developed in a straight line, as even the Soviet Union had gone through periods of decrease in grain output.<sup>22</sup> But in the wake of Liu Shaoqi's attack he no longer dodged the issue. In Shandong, Henan and Gansu, he noted, tens of millions of farmers struggled to survive on a handful of grain a day, and the famine had little to do with natural calamities. People were starving because of the mistakes made by the party. He had seven adjectives to describe the Leap Forward: too high, too big, too equal (meaning that all incentives had been erased), too dispersed, too chaotic, too fast, too inclined to transfer resources. A lengthy analysis followed, as well as concrete proposals aimed at lowering all production targets and getting the economy back on track. A close follower of Mao, he had an astute way of absolving him of all blame: 'Chairman Mao's directives are entirely correct, but we, including the central organs, have made mistakes in executing them.'<sup>23</sup>

Li received the Chairman's endorsement. The following month he gave a similar report at a top-level party meeting in Lushan, again exempting the Chairman from any responsibility. It was the turning point in the famine. Li was a soft-spoken, unassuming man whose loyalty towards Mao could hardly be doubted and who,

unlike Peng Dehuai, had found a way of presenting the facts without incurring his wrath. Mao, a paranoid leader who suspected betrayal behind the slightest disapproval, praised the report instead.

A series of biting assessments followed Li Fuchun's speech. Li Yiqing, a senior party secretary, reported that in 1958 more than 140,000 tonnes of farming tools had been thrown into the backyard furnaces in the model province of Henan. Wu Jingtian, vice-minister of railways, explained how one in five locomotives was out of circulation because of engine damage. Peng De, vice-minister of transportation, announced that fewer than two out of three vehicles under his command actually worked. Vice-minister of metallurgy Xu Chi noted that the steelworks of Angang were forced to stop for weeks on end over the summer because of coal shortages.<sup>24</sup>

Mao rarely attended the meetings, following them instead through written reports compiled every evening. He was in retreat, strategically withholding judgement and finding out where his colleagues stood. But the Chairman was not pleased. Letting off steam with his doctor Li Zhisui, he said: 'All the good party members are dead. The only ones left are a bunch of zombies.'<sup>25</sup> But he took no action. At last, party leaders started to discuss among themselves the extent of the damage done by three years of forced collectivisation. What they discovered was destruction on a scale few could have imagined.

# Destruction

## Agriculture

The term 'command economy' comes from the German *Befehlswirtschaft*. It was originally applied to the Nazi economy, but was later used to describe the Soviet Union. Instead of allowing dispersed buyers and sellers to determine their own economic activities according to the laws of supply and demand, a higher authority would issue commands determining the overall direction of the economy following a master plan. The command principle entailed that all economic decisions were centralised for the greater good, as the state determined what should be produced, how much should be produced, who produced what and where, how resources should be allocated and what prices should be charged for materials, goods and services. A central plan replaced the market.

As planners took over the economy in China, farmers lost control over the harvest. In 1953 a monopoly over grain was introduced, decreeing that farmers must sell all surplus grain to the state at prices determined by the state. The aim behind the monopoly was to stabilise the price of grain across the country, eliminate speculation and guarantee the grain needed to feed the urban population and fuel an industrial expansion. But what was 'surplus grain' in a country where many farmers barely grew enough to scrape by? It was defined as seed, fodder and a basic grain ration set at roughly 13 to 15 kilos per head each month. However, 23 to 26 kilos of unhusked grain were required to provide 1,700 to 1,900 calories per day, an amount international aid organisations consider to be the bare minimum for subsistence.<sup>1</sup> The notion of a surplus, in other words, was a political construct designed to give legitimacy to the extraction of grain from the countryside. By forcing villagers to sell grain before their own subsistence needs were met, the state also made them more dependent on the collective. Extra grain above the basic ration had to be bought back from the state by villagers with work points, which were distributed on the basis of their performance in collective labour. Farmers had lost control not only of their land and their harvest, but also of their own work schedules: local cadres determined who should do what and for how many work points, from collecting manure to looking after the buffaloes in the fields. As the market was eliminated and money lost its purchasing power, grain became the currency of exchange. Most of it was in the hands of the state.

But a more insidious problem lurked behind the notion of a grain surplus, namely the enormous pressure applied to local leaders to pledge ever greater grain sales. The amount sold to the state was determined in a series of meetings which started from the village up, as a team leader passed on a quota to the brigade, where the pledges were adjusted and collated into a bid passed on to the commune, which then negotiated how much it would deliver to the county. By the time a pledge reached the level of the region and the province, the amount had been revised upwards several times as a result of peer pressure. A figure very far removed from reality finally landed on the desk of Li Fuchun, the man responsible for planning the economy and setting national production targets. He, in turn, inflated the target according to the latest policy shifts agreed on by the leadership: that new figure was the party's command.

The pressure to show sensational gains in grain output reached a climax during the Great Leap Forward. In a frenzy of competitive bidding, party officials from the village all the way up to the province tried to outdo each other, as one record after the other was announced by the propaganda machine, in turn spurring even more cautious cadres to inflate the figures. Even after the party had tried to rein in some of the more extravagant claims in early 1959, failure to project a substantial leap in output was interpreted as 'rightist conservatism', in particular during the purges which followed the Lushan plenum. In a climate of fear, village leaders followed orders rather than try to haggle over quotas. More often than not, a party secretary or deputy from the commune would simply drive up to a strip of land, have a look around and casually determine the target yield. A team leader explained the process as follows: 'In 1960 we were given a quota of 260 tonnes. This was increased by 5.5 tonnes a few days later. Then the commune held a meeting and added a further 25 tonnes. After two days, the commune phoned us to say that the quota had gone up to 315 tonnes: how this all happened we have no idea.'<sup>2</sup>

The higher the office, the greater the power to increase the quota, which had repercussions for every subordinate unit, and each had to juggle the figures to comply. When Xie Fuzhi, the boss in Yunnan, was told by



Beijing that the national target for grain output had been raised to 300 million tonnes, he immediately convened a telephone conference to explain to county leaders that this really meant 350–400 million tonnes. Yunnan, he rapidly calculated, contained about one-thirtieth of the total population, meaning a share of 10 million tonnes. Since Yunnan did not want to trail behind the rest of the country, Xie raised this to a nicely rounded total of 25,000,000,000 jin, equivalent to 12.5 million tonnes.<sup>3</sup> Everybody from the region down to the county, commune, brigade and village had to scramble and adjust the local quotas accordingly.

With inflated crops came procurement quotas which were far too high, leading to shortages and outright famine. But if the figures were made up, how do we know what the real crop was and what proportion of the harvest was procured by the state? Kenneth Walker, a specialist in agrarian economics at the University of London, spent a decade painstakingly assembling statistical data from a whole range of local newspapers, published statistics and policy guidelines. He showed that the state imposed the highest levies in 1959–62 at a time when the average output per head was actually at its lowest.<sup>4</sup>

Just as his study appeared in print in 1984, a statistical yearbook was published by the National Statistical Bureau in China with a set of historical data covering the famine years. Most observers have relied on these official figures. But why should we trust a set of statistics published by a party notoriously protective of its own past? Problems with the official statistics appeared when Yang Jisheng, a retired journalist from the Xinhua agency, published a book on the famine based on party archives. He relied on a set of figures compiled in 1962 by the Bureau for Grain. But this merely transferred the problem from one set of numbers to another. The fact that a document comes from an archive does not automatically make it right. Every archive has a series of competing figures, put together in different ways by different agencies at different times. As a result of political pressure the statistical work of the Bureau for Grain disintegrated from 1958 to 1962, to such an extent that the state itself could no longer calculate a realistic level of grain production. And the distortion was at its greatest at the very top, as false reporting and inflated claims accumulated on their way up the party hierarchy. If the leaders themselves were lost in a morass of statistical invention, it seems unlikely that we can magically extract the numerical truth from a single document in the party archives. Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and other leaders knew all too well that they were looking at the world through layers of distorted filters, and their solution was to spend more time investigating what happened on the ground in field trips to the countryside.

Table 5: Different Estimates for Grain Output and Grain Procurements in Hunan (million tonnes)

	Total estimated crop output		Total estimated procurements	
	Bureau for Grain	Office for Statistics	Bureau for Grain	Office for Statistics
1956	—	10.36	—	2.39 (23.1%)
1957	11.3	11.32	2.29 (20.2%)	2.74 (24.2%)
1958	12.27	12.25	2.66 (21.7%)	3.50 (28.5%)
1959	11.09	11.09	2.99 (26.9%)	3.89 (35.1%)
1960	8	8.02	1.75 (21.9%)	2.50 (31.2%)
1961	8	8	1.55 (19.4%)	2.21 (27.6%)

Source: Hunan, May 1965, 187-1-1432, pp. 3–8; the crop figures are from Hunan, 30 June 1961, 194-1-701, pp. 3–4, which has figures which are slightly different from the 1965 estimations; the figures for the Bureau for Grain are from Yang, *Mubei*, p. 540.

On the other hand, between 1962 and 1965 local statistical bureaus tried to rebuild their credibility and often went back to the years of famine to find out what had happened. The figures they produced indicate a much higher degree of procurement than those provided by the Bureau for Grain. Table 5 compares the figures compiled by the Bureau in 1962 with the local numbers calculated in 1965 by the provincial Office for Statistics in Hunan in an attempt to determine how much farmers had actually contributed to the state. The difference in estimates for the grain output is minimal, but when it comes to the size of the levies the figures provided by the province turn out to be much higher, ranging from 28 to 35 per cent of the total harvest. Why is there a discrepancy of 4 to 10 per cent? One reason can be found in the nature of the statistical evidence. Closer scrutiny indicates that the figures provided by the Bureau for Grain were not carefully reconstructed in the aftermath of the famine, but rather mechanically compiled from the plans the Bureau had handed out in the previous years. Each plan had two sets of numbers, one set indicating the procurements ‘actually realised’ in the current year, the other setting targets for the coming year. The procurement figures given for 1958, for instance, come from the plan for 1959, meaning that they were rough approximations.<sup>5</sup> To this we should add the fact that the Bureau for Grain in Beijing was under much pressure in 1962 to show that it had not allowed excessive procurements to drain the countryside of grain, and would thus have adopted a set of low figures. But



there is another reason for the mismatch: at every level of society, from the village and the commune up to the province, grain was being hidden. The figures compiled in 1965 by the Office for Statistics in Hunan were based on careful research after the famine. The Office could go back to whole sets of commune and county statistics to find out how much had actually been procured, in contrast to the numbers the province officially handed over to the centre. The discrepancy, in other words, corresponds to the amount of procured grain which escaped the gaze of the state.

Other examples confirm that the rates of procurement were much higher than those suggested by the Bureau for Grain. In Zhejiang, for instance, Zeng Shaowen, a top provincial official, admitted in 1961 that some 2.9 million tonnes, or 40.9 per cent of the harvest, was procured in 1958, followed by an even larger 43.2 per cent in the following year. The Bureau for Grain gives much lower percentages, namely 30.4 per cent for 1958 followed by 34.4 per cent.<sup>6</sup> A similar story comes from Guizhou. In the provincial archives, which Yang Jisheng was unable to access, a document from the provincial party committee shows that an average of 1.8 million tonnes was procured each year from 1958 to 1960, meaning 44.4 per cent, with a peak of 2.34 million tonnes in 1959 – equivalent to an enormous 56.5 per cent of the crop. The figures given by the Bureau for Grain are on average 1.4 million tonnes for the same three years, or about a quarter less.<sup>7</sup>

Some of these calculations may seem rather abstract, but they matter a great deal. Grain is not only the currency of exchange in a command economy; it becomes the source of survival in times of famine. When either Hunan or Zhejiang increased their procurements by 8 to 10 per cent, taking an extra 750,000 tonnes of grain from the countryside in the middle of the famine, the number of people forced into starvation grew proportionally. We have seen how one kilo of grain provided a sufficient number of calories for one person each day, meaning that a family of three could live on a tonne per year. But the real point is that many farmers could have survived famine if their rations had been only marginally increased by some 400 or 500 calories a day, equivalent to a large bowl in the evening. In short, in order to understand how people perished on such a scale, it is vital to see the role played by increased procurements in times of declining harvests.

Table 6: Different Estimates of Grain Procurement (million tonnes)

Total output		Official statistics	Total procurements	
			Bureau for Grain	Bureau for Statistics
1958	200	51	56.27	66.32
1959	170	67.49	60.71	72.23
1960	143.50	51.09	39.04	50.35
1961	147.47	54.52	33.96	—

Source: Walker, *Food Grain Procurement*, p. 162; Yang, *Mubei*, p. 539; Yunnan, 1962, 81-7-86, p. 13; output figures are given for unhusked grain while procurement figures are for processed grain, hiding a further loss of about a fifth of the total weight.

How much grain was procured overall? Table 6 has three sets of statistics. The first two show the overall figures reached by Kenneth Walker in 1983 following his research into published statistics as well as the numbers provided by Yang Jisheng from the Bureau for Grain. But, as we have seen, the Bureau for Grain should not be taken at its word, as it had neither the expertise nor the political inclination to collect the actual figures. The third set of statistics comes from the notes taken by the Yunnan Office for Statistics in 1962 as its members attended one of the national conferences periodically convened by the Bureau for Statistics in Beijing. No one set of true numbers will ever be discovered in the archives, since every figure was a statement bound by politics and expediency rather than by expertise. But it seems that the Bureau for Grain compiled figures which were far below both what foreign observers managed to calculate on the basis of published regional statistics and what the Bureau for Statistics compiled in 1962. In short, evidence from different sources shows that the level of procurement varied from 30 to 37 per cent nationally, far above the more usual 20 to 25 per cent extracted up to 1958. As Mao had indicated on 25 March 1959 at a secret gathering of party leaders, ‘If you don’t go above a third, people won’t rebel.’ He himself encouraged much greater procurements than usual, at a time when it was well known that the crop figures had been inflated.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the idea that the state mistakenly took too much grain from the countryside because it assumed that the harvest was much bigger than it was is largely a myth – at most partially true for the autumn of 1958 only.

A proportion of the procured grain was sold back to the farmers – at a premium – but they were at the end of a long waiting list. As we have seen in Chapters 10 and 15, the party had evolved a set of political priorities which ignored the needs of the countryside. The leadership decided to increase grain exports to honour its foreign contracts and maintain its international reputation, to such an extent that a policy of ‘export above all

else' was adopted in 1960. It chose to increase its foreign aid to its allies, shipping grain for free to countries like Albania. Priority was also given to the growing populations of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and the province of Liaoning – the heartland of heavy industry – followed by the requirements of city people in general. The consequence of these political decisions was not only an increase in the proportion of procurements, but also an increase in the overall amount of grain handed over to the state out of these procurements. In the case of Zhejiang, for instance, an annual average of 1.68 million tonnes left the province from 1958 to 1961, in contrast to 1.2 million tonnes in each of the preceding three years. In 1958 alone that meant that more than half of the procured grain was handed over to Beijing even before the province started to feed its urban residents.<sup>9</sup> Overall, the amount of grain taken out of the procurements by the state to feed Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Liaoning province and maintain its export market went up every single quarter, from 1.6 million tonnes in the third quarter of 1956 to 1.8 million tonnes in the same period in 1957, to 2.3 million tonnes in 1958, to 2.5 million tonnes a year later and to a high of 3 million tonnes in three months in 1960.<sup>10</sup>

The net effect of these policy priorities was that the lives of many villagers were destroyed. As Wang Renzhong put it in a meeting of the leaders of all southern provinces in August 1961, 'extraordinarily difficult conditions demand extraordinary measures', explaining that grain could be provided only to the cities, so that villages in the grip of famine would have to fend for themselves. As he saw it, some of the parts had to be sacrificed in order to keep the whole.<sup>11</sup>

He was not alone. Zhou Enlai, for one, was relentless in pushing for greater requisitions. He was the man in charge of making sure that enough grain was taken from the countryside to feed the cities and earn foreign currency. He badgered provincial bosses in person, over the phone, through his deputies and in a ceaseless string of telegrams marked 'urgent'. He too had a keen sense of hierarchy in which the needs of the countryside had to give way to the interests of the state – which he represented. He knew full well that the vast amounts of grain he was given by Li Jingquan, a radical follower of Mao, could lead only to a situation of mass famine in Sichuan. But others, too, clung rigidly to the view that the starvation of the people mattered less than the demands of the state. Deng Xiaoping thought that in the command economy requisitions had to be enforced ruthlessly 'as if in a war': no matter how much a provincial leader tried to defend his turf the party line had to be held, or the state would perish. Speaking at the end of 1961, when the extent of the famine was well known among the leadership, this is what Deng Xiaoping had to say about Sichuan, where huge requisitions caused the deaths of many millions of people: 'In the past, procurements have been too heavy in some regions, for instance in Sichuan, where they have been heavy for quite a few years, including this year, but there was no alternative. I approve of the Sichuan style, they never moan about hardship, we should all learn from Sichuan. And I am not saying this because I myself am from Sichuan.'<sup>12</sup> As we have seen, Mao phrased it differently: 'When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.'<sup>13</sup>

The procurement prices paid by the state for grain varied from province to province. In the case of maize, for instance, it ranged from 124 yuan per tonne in Guangxi to 152 yuan just across the border in Guangdong in early 1961. The difference for rice could be up to 50 per cent, for instance 124 yuan per tonne in Guangxi versus 180 yuan for the same quantity in Shanghai.<sup>14</sup> The state made a substantial profit by exporting rice for 400 yuan per tonne.<sup>15</sup> These prices were periodically adjusted, but the procurement prices remained so low that more often than not farmers produced grain at a loss. As late as 1976 it was unprofitable simply for that reason to cultivate wheat, barley, maize and sorghum. The income on rice was marginal.<sup>16</sup> But in a command economy farmers no longer decided for themselves which crop they could grow, as they had to follow the orders of local cadres instead – who in turn had to apply the commands of the party. And the planners were transfixed by grain output, deciding to force an ever greater proportion of farmers to concentrate on grain – to the detriment of the overall economy. This vision was translated in 1959 into a policy of encouraging grain production above all else, leading many provinces to extend the surface cultivated with grain by some 10 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Farmers who were asked to abandon more remunerative crops for maize, rice or wheat lost out. For instance, after some villages in Zhejiang were told to grow grain instead of the melons, sugarcane and tobacco they had habitually cultivated, they saw their income plunge.<sup>18</sup>

Another problem with the command economy was that officials on the ground did not always know what they were doing, and they imposed decisions which turned out to be disastrous. We have already seen how close

cropping and deep ploughing were insisted on by the regime at the height of the Great Leap Forward. This was compounded by capricious interventions by local cadres with little knowledge of agriculture. In 1959 in Luokang commune a local leader decided to replace the existing crop with sweet potatoes on half of the available acreage, only to change his mind later and substitute the potatoes with peanuts. These were then torn out to make room for rice instead. The previous year the commune had tried deep ploughing, using vast concentrations of manpower on small strips of land to dig deep furrows, much of it by hand. Huge amounts of fertiliser were applied, in some cases up to 30 tonnes a hectare. It all came to nothing.<sup>19</sup> In Kaiping county, Guangdong, thousands of villagers were repeatedly forced to plant a crop in the early spring of 1959 despite bitterly cold weather: the seeds froze on three occasions, and in the end fields yielded a paltry 450 kilos per hectare.<sup>20</sup>

But even more disastrous was the command to plant less. Mao was so convinced that the countryside was heaving under the weight of grain that he suggested that a third of the land be allowed to lie fallow. 'People in China on average cultivate three mu, but I think that two mu is enough.'<sup>21</sup> Combined with an exodus of farmers towards the cities, the overall acreage under cultivation plummeted. In Hunan in 1958 some 5.78 million hectares were cultivated with grain, but by 1962 this was down by 15 per cent to 4.92 million hectares.<sup>22</sup> In Zhejiang province some 65,000 hectares of cultivated land vanished every year, leading to a loss of about a tenth of the total acreage by 1961.<sup>23</sup> These provincial averages masked deep regional differences. In the Wuhan region, for instance, just over half of the available 37,000 hectares were tilled.<sup>24</sup> Tan Zhenlin, the man in charge of agriculture, noted in 1959 that some 7.3 million hectares were allowed to lie fallow.<sup>25</sup> Speaking in early 1961 Peng Zhen estimated that the total sown area stood at 107 million hectares: if true this would have meant a waste of 23 million hectares since 1958.<sup>26</sup>

To this loss had to be added a change in the proportion of grains grown. The urban population much preferred fine grains – rice, wheat, soybeans – although in the north considerable amounts of coarse grain – sorghum, maize and millet – were also consumed. But sweet potatoes were regarded as peasant fare and were not generally eaten in significant amounts.<sup>27</sup> Sweet potatoes, moreover, were a perishable commodity, meaning that the state had a limited interest in them: most of the procurements were in fine grains. But the proportion of sweet potatoes grew during the years of famine, as cadres responded to pressure to increase the yield by switching to the tuber, which was easy to cultivate. More often than not farmers were left with potatoes only.

By imposing a monopoly on the sale of grain the state undertook a task of mammoth proportions. State employees had to buy the grain, store it, transport it to different destinations across the country, store it again and distribute it against ration coupons – all according to a master plan rather than the incentives created by the market. Even a wealthy country might have balked at the immensity of the task, but China was a poor nation, and a very large one at that. State storage – as opposed to small inventories distributed across a wide range of private and public producers, retailers and consumers – contributed in no small measure to the destruction of grain. Insects were common, rats abounded. A detailed investigation by the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress showed that in Nanxiong county an astonishing 2,533 of all 2,832 local granaries had rats. Insects infested a third of all 123 state granaries and an even larger proportion of the 728 commune granaries in Chao'an county.<sup>28</sup> In Yunnan in the first half of 1961 some 240,000 tonnes were contaminated by vermin.<sup>29</sup> In Zhucheng county, Shandong, each kilo of grain was crawling with hundreds of insects.<sup>30</sup>

And then there was rot. Poor storage conditions contributed to it, as well as the practice, not always successfully detected by grain inspectors, of bulking up grain with water. In Guangdong close to a third of 1.5 million tonnes of state grain contained too much water, so that one granary after another succumbed to rot.<sup>31</sup> In Hunan one-fifth of all grain in state granaries was either infested with insects or corrupted by a high water content. In Changsha, the provincial capital, over half of all stored grain was contaminated.<sup>32</sup> Temperatures in the state granaries were often too high, accelerating the blight, and in turn benefiting the insects, which took advantage of the heat and moisture. In Yunnan the temperature in some of the granaries reached 39–43 degrees Celsius.<sup>33</sup> Even far away from the humidity of subtropical China, in the cold winter of the northern plain, rot was common. Just outside the capital, in the middle of the worst year of famine, well over 50 tonnes of sweet potatoes decayed in a dozen villages in Yanqing county. A further 6 tonnes putrefied in storage facilities across the Haidian district in Beijing.<sup>34</sup>

Significant losses were also caused by fire, through arson or accident. In Yunnan alone 70 tonnes of food went

up in smoke each month in 1961; more than 300 tonnes were completely written off each and every month in 1960 and in 1961 due to blight, insects and fire. The Bureau for Security calculated that the grain lost to fire in 1960 alone in that province would have been sufficient to feed 1.5 million people adequately for a whole month.<sup>35</sup> Yunnan was not the worst offender. In the Anshan region, Liaoning province, 400 tonnes were destroyed each month in 1960, although this figure included only losses that could be attributed to theft and corruption – a topic we will address later.<sup>36</sup>

The transportation system was disastrously affected by the programmes of the Great Leap Forward. The railway system was paralysed by early 1959, overwhelmed by the amount of goods the plan directed from one end of the country to the other. Lorries rapidly ran out of fuel. All over the country grain was going to waste on railway sidings. In the small provincial capital of Kunming, some 15 tonnes were lost on trains and lorries each month.<sup>37</sup> But this was nothing compared to what happened in the countryside after the harvest. In Hunan, the entire system seized up in the summer of 1959 because of a shortage of hundreds of freight wagons which were needed every day. Lorries were lacking too, so that only half the grain could be transported from the countryside to the main railway stations. Some 200,000 tonnes of grain accumulated by the roadside, although only 60,000 tonnes could be loaded every month.<sup>38</sup>

In the end farmers did not even have enough seed left to plant the crop. Travelling by train from Beijing to Shanghai in early spring 1962, foreign visitors noted that swathes of farmland along the tracks were sparsely planted at best, field after field lying fallow.<sup>39</sup> Across the country, once carefully manicured fields now looked desolate, with clumps of stunted wheat or rice withering for lack of fertiliser. Large plots lay abandoned because the farmers had nothing to plant. Everywhere vast amounts of seed normally put aside for sowing in the following season had been eaten by desperate farmers. Even in Zhejiang, relatively sheltered from the worst effects of the famine, one in five villages lacked the seed necessary to plant the fields.<sup>40</sup> In subtropical Guangdong, normally ablaze in every shade of green in spring, 10 per cent of the sprouts routinely rotted, the seed weak and impoverished, the land leached of all nutrients. In some communes in Zhongshan county half the fields wilted, as fledging plants turned yellow and then slowly decomposed into a brown mush.<sup>41</sup>

As the planners directed an ever larger proportion of the farmland to be cultivated with grain, the output in commercial crops and edible oils plummeted. But unlike grain, there was no notion of a subsistence threshold below which the state should not intervene, and procurements soared as a result.

Cotton is a good example. We have already noted how textile products from China flooded the international market in 1958, as the country declared a trade offensive by exporting goods at prices below economic cost. The strategy backfired, but exports of textiles nonetheless increased in order to settle the trade agreements entered into with foreign partners. China shipped 1 million metres of cotton cloth to the Soviet Union in 1957, then 2 million metres in 1959 and a huge 149 million metres in 1960.<sup>42</sup> The cost of importing 10,000 tonnes of raw cotton to feed the textile industries was US\$8 million. The mathematics was simple. As finance minister Li Xiannian exclaimed in November 1961, calculating the equivalent import cost of an extra 50,000 tonnes of cotton that had been procured from the countryside that year, '40 million US dollars is really wonderful!'<sup>43</sup>

Table 7: Cotton Output and Cotton Procurements in Hunan (tonnes)

	Output	Procurement
1957	21,557	17,235 (80%)
1958	23,681	15,330 (64.7%)
1959	32,500	28,410 (87.4%)
1960	21,000	19,950 (95%)
1961	15,130	15,530 (102.6%)

Source: Hunan, 1962, 187-1-1021, p. 33; March 1964, 187-1-1154, pp. 80 and 97.

The lure of the greenback was irresistible. Procurements increased from 1.64 million tonnes in 1957 to 2.1 million tonnes the following year. Although only half of that amount was levied in 1960, as the cotton crop collapsed, it still meant that between 82 and 90 per cent of the total cotton output ended up in the hands of the state.<sup>44</sup> Take the example of Hunan (Table 7). As the actual output plunged after a peak in 1959, the percentage taken by the state shot up from 80 per cent to 95 per cent in 1960. In 1961, Hunan officials managed to procure more than the total cotton output by fanning out all over the province and sweeping up every bale of cotton, including reserves set aside by teams and communes from the previous crop. This strategy



had been adopted by Hebei in 1959 and was highly commended by the leadership. As the State Council explained in February 1959, Hebei had managed to increase its procurements by a third by commandeering reserves found in collective storage facilities and by 'taking the cotton still in the hands of the masses'.<sup>45</sup>

The masses were left without much clothing. Just as grain was distributed according to political priorities which favoured the export market above domestic needs, a large proportion of the cotton was fed to the textile industries and sold on the international market. What remained was rationed and distributed in dribs and drabs following a well-established pecking order which placed party and army at the top followed by the urban population, each of these categories being further fine-tuned into an intricate hierarchy which had one thing in common: the producers of cotton, namely people in the countryside, were generally excluded. Out of the 3.5 million cotton pieces (jian) produced in 1961, about half were reserved for party and army uniforms and 1 million were put aside for the export market, leaving 800,000 for a population of 600 million.<sup>46</sup> In Guangzhou ration coupons were required for towels, socks, shirts, vests and raincoats. Cotton cloth was rationed to a metre a year, those living in the suburbs getting one-third less than city dwellers. Before the Great Leap Forward, by contrast, anyone could buy more than seven metres of cotton a year.<sup>47</sup>

By 1960, the situation in the countryside had become so desperate that farmers ate the cotton seeds. In Cixi county, Zhejiang, some 2,000 villagers were poisoned in a single month by eating cakes made of seeds, an indication of the extent of despair reached in one of the most sheltered provinces of China. In Henan they poisoned over 100,000 people in the region around Xinxiang alone, killing more than 150.<sup>48</sup> Across the land desperately hungry villagers ate anything they could get their hands on, from leather belts and straw roofs to cotton padding. Spending a month travelling through some of the most devastated regions along the Huai River in September 1961, Hu Yaobang, a party chief and associate of Deng Xiaoping who would soar to pre-eminence decades later by steering the country away from orthodox Marxism, reported seeing women and children stark naked. Many families of five or six shared one blanket. 'It is hard to imagine if you do not see it with your own eyes. There are several places where we should urgently address this issue, to avoid people freezing to death.'<sup>49</sup> Throughout the country those who died of starvation often did so naked, even in the middle of the winter.

Although slaughtered in significant quantities during the Great Leap Forward in 1958, over the years poultry, pigs and cattle mainly succumbed to neglect, hunger, cold and disease. Numbers give a sense of the extent of the devastation. Whereas some 12.7 million pigs were rooting about in 1958, a mere 3.4 million scrawny animals were alive in 1961 in Hunan province (Table 8). Hebei had 3.8 million pigs in 1961, half of what the province boasted five years earlier. A million cattle had also vanished.<sup>50</sup> Shandong lost 50 per cent of its cattle during the famine.<sup>51</sup>

Table 8: Pigs in Hunan Province (millions)

1957	1958	1959	1960	1961
10.9	12.7	7.95	4.4	3.4

Source: Hunan, 1962, 187-1-1021, p. 59.

Neglect was widespread, as incentives to look after livestock were removed once all the animals had been turned over to the people's communes. In Huaxian, just outside Guangzhou, pigs stood in a foot of excrement. In some villages the pig sheds were destroyed for fertiliser, leaving the animals exposed to the elements.<sup>52</sup> Routine quarantine measures broke down, as veterinary services lay in disarray. Rinderpest and swine fever spread; chicken flu was common.<sup>53</sup> The winter exacted the highest toll. Tens of thousands of pigs died of hunger in Cixi county, Zhejiang, in a single winter month.<sup>54</sup> In December 1960 alone 600,000 pigs died in Hunan province.<sup>55</sup>

Even more revealing are the disease rates, which rocketed sharply. In Dongguan, Guangdong, the death rate for pigs was just over 9 per cent in 1956. Three years later a quarter of all pigs died, and by 1960 well over half of all pigs perished. The county was left with a million pigs where more than 4.2 million had existed a few years earlier.<sup>56</sup> In Zhejiang, the death rate in some counties was 600 per cent, meaning that for every birth six pigs died; the entire herd was soon eliminated.<sup>57</sup> In all of Henan the situation with livestock was better in 1940, in the middle of the war against Japan, than it was in 1961 – according to Zhou Enlai himself.<sup>58</sup>

Before the pigs died of hunger they turned on each other. More often than not livestock was not segregated by weight, meaning that they were all locked up in a common space where the smaller ones were pushed aside, trampled on, mauled to death and devoured. In parts of Jiangyin county, for instance, many of the pigs froze to death, but quite a few were cannibalised by larger hogs.<sup>59</sup> When large numbers of pigs are thrown together in a harsh environment, apparently no pecking order develops, and each animal regards all others as its enemy. In Beijing's Red Star commune, where the death rate for livestock was 45 per cent, villagers noticed that hogs ate piglets, as all were confined together indiscriminately.<sup>60</sup>

A small proportion of the deaths were caused by innovations in animal husbandry. Like close cropping and deep ploughing, these were supposed to propel the country past its rivals. All sorts of experiments were carried out to increase the weight of pigs, some of them inspired by the fraudulent theories of Trofim Lysenko. A protégé of Stalin, Lysenko rejected genetics and believed that inheritance was shaped by the environment (Lysenko, it might be added, openly expressed his contempt for the Great Leap Forward in 1958, to the great irritation of the leadership in Beijing).<sup>61</sup> Just as seeds of hybrid varieties were developed for greater resistance, hybrid breeding of livestock was envisaged by senior leaders. Jiang Hua, party secretary of Zhejiang, thus asked the county leaders to take steps to 'actively shape nature': he suggested cross-breeding sows with bulls to produce heavier piglets.<sup>62</sup> Local cadres, eager to fulfil impossible quotas for meat delivery, also artificially inseminated animals that had not even reached maturity, including ones weighing a mere 15 kilos (a healthy adult pig should weigh between 100 and 120 kilos). Many of the animals were crippled as a result.<sup>63</sup>

Despite a precipitous decline in livestock, state procurements were relentless. In Hebei and Shandong a ban on the slaughter of animals was imposed in the countryside for a period of three months in early 1959. As we have seen, Mao applauded the ban, going so far as to suggest that a resolution be passed that nobody should eat meat: all of it should be exported to honour foreign commitments.<sup>64</sup> Mao did not quite get his way, although the rations for the urban population were slashed several times. Even in Shanghai, a city where on average each person consumed some twenty kilos of meat annually in 1953, a mere 4.5 kilos in ration tickets were allocated by the plan in 1960, although in reality much less was available.<sup>65</sup> But party members continued to receive a regular supply of meat. Guangdong was thus ordered in 1961 to deliver 2,500 pigs to the capital, all earmarked for state banquets and foreign guests: this was in addition to the more regular state procurement quotas.<sup>66</sup>

The fishing industry was also badly damaged by collectivisation, as the equipment was either confiscated or poorly maintained. In Wuxing, a district of the prosperous silk city of Huzhou situated on the south of Lake Tai, one in five boats was no longer seaworthy because of insufficient tong oil to repair sprung seams. The number of leaks steadily increased, since the marine nails were no longer being made of forged iron.<sup>67</sup> The overall catch tumbled. On Chaohu Lake, Anhui, a single team of fishermen routinely caught some 215 tonnes of fish in 1958. Two years later no more than 9 tonnes were hauled aboard, as boats and nets rotted away without any care being taken. Many fishermen abandoned the trade because of a lack of incentives.<sup>68</sup>

Ploughs, rakes, sickles, hoes, shovels, buckets, baskets, mats, carts and tools of every kind were collectivised, but which collectivity actually owned them? A tug of war began between teams, brigades and communes, with mutual recriminations and random repossessions, the result of which was that in the end nobody really cared. Some villagers would simply throw their ploughs and rakes aside in the field at the end of the day. Whereas in the past a good tool could last up to ten years – some ploughs managing to survive for sixty years with careful repairs – they no longer lasted for much more than a year or two. A mat used to dry millet, when carefully maintained, might only have to be repaired after ten years, but with the advent of the people's communes most were worn out after one season. Some rakes, it was reported by a team of investigators from Shanghai, had to be repaired after a day.<sup>69</sup>

And those were the tools that had not been devoured in the backyard furnaces during the frenzied iron and steel movement in 1958. At the Lushan plenum held in the summer of 1961, Li Yiqing, secretary of the south-central region, told the party leaders that 140,000 tonnes of farming tools had been thrown into the fires in the model province of Henan.<sup>70</sup> When these losses were tallied with what was destroyed through neglect, the total varied from about a third to half of all equipment. In Shandong a third of all tools were useless within a year of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>71</sup> In the Shaoguan region, Guangdong, 40 per cent of all necessary equipment was gone by 1961, meaning a loss of some 34 million tools. A third of what was left was broken.<sup>72</sup> The number of

waterwheels in Hebei was halved, while carts were also reduced by 50 per cent.<sup>73</sup> In Zhejiang province half of all water pumps, over half of all planting machines and more than a third of all threshing machines were damaged beyond recovery.<sup>74</sup>

Besides the fact that there were few incentives to repair tools that belonged to everybody in general and nobody in particular, other reasons stood in the way of recovery. Widespread shortages of natural resources, especially timber, meant galloping inflation – despite the fixed prices of the planned economy. In Zhejiang, for instance, bamboo was 40 per cent more expensive than before the Great Leap Forward, and the iron allocated to the countryside for tool production was of inferior quality.<sup>75</sup> Their homes already stripped of cooking utensils and agricultural implements to feed the backyard furnaces, the villagers were then handed back useless ingots of brittle iron. Half the metal allocated to villages in Guangdong in 1961 was defective.<sup>76</sup> Tool production in state enterprises, as we shall see, did not fare any better.



## Industry

Ever greater output targets were assigned to factories, foundries, workshops, mines and power plants all over China. How a production unit was rewarded was determined by the percentage of the quota it managed to fulfil. The output total was the magic number that determined the rise and fall of any one factory. And just as cadres in the people's communes pledged ever increasing amounts of grain, all over the country factories tried to outperform each other in fulfilling the plan. Lists of output figures were broadcast on a daily basis by the propaganda machine, reproduced on chalkboard messages and wall newspapers for everybody to see. Charts and diagrams with growth projections were displayed in factory shops. Photos of model workers were enshrined under glass on a 'board of honour', while posters, stars, ribbons and slogans adorned the walls of every workshop. Underachievers were identified at factory meetings, while workers who overfulfilled the targets were commended, some of them attending mass meetings in Beijing reviewed by the Chairman himself. Above the hissing molten metal, the clang of crucibles and the whistling steam an incessant racket would come from loudspeakers, spewing out propaganda and radio programmes to encourage workers to increase production.<sup>1</sup>

As the supreme goal of the red factory was output, the cost of input was often neglected. In the sprawling bureaucracy in charge of industry, from the central economic ministries to the different administrative departments within the factories, nobody quite managed to keep track of the staggering amount of equipment ordered from abroad. Even Zhou Enlai, who so ruthlessly pressed for the extraction of foodstuffs from the countryside to meet export targets, seemed unable to curb the import of machinery effectively. Enterprises also borrowed money to fund constant expansion, build prestige buildings and purchase more equipment. In the case of the Luoyang Mining Machinery Factory, the monthly interest owed to the bank was equal to the factory's entire wage package.<sup>2</sup>

But, once installed, the new equipment was subjected to poor maintenance and relentless maltreatment. On a visit to a wharf in Shanghai in 1961, the otherwise sympathetic delegation from East Germany were taken aback by the state in which they found imported machinery. New materials like sheet metal, tubes and profile iron rusted in the open.<sup>3</sup> The Iron and Steel Plant in Wuhan, inaugurated with much fanfare by Mao at the height of the Great Leap Forward in September 1958, gave a similar impression of extreme neglect, a mere two out of six Siemens-Martin furnaces operating at full capacity by 1962.<sup>4</sup> More detailed reports by investigation teams confirmed that materials, tools and machinery were neglected or even deliberately damaged. In the Shijiazhuang Iron and Steel Company, for instance, half of all engines broke down frequently.<sup>5</sup> A culture of waste developed. In Luoyang, three factories alone had accumulated more than 2,500 tonnes of scrap metal that went nowhere.<sup>6</sup> In Shenyang, sloppy streamlets of molten copper and nickel solutions ran between heaps of scrap metal.<sup>7</sup>

Waste developed not only because raw resources and supplies were poorly allocated, but because factory bosses deliberately bent the rules to increase output. The brand-new iron and steel plant in Jinan, according to a team of auditors, wasted a fifth of total state investment, or 12.4 million yuan, in its first two years by adding sand to hundreds of tonnes of manganese ore, resulting in a useless mixture which had to be discarded.<sup>8</sup>

As everyone worked feverishly towards higher production levels, mountains of substandard goods accumulated. Many a factory spewed out inferior goods as corners were cut in the relentless pursuit of higher output. The very fabric of material culture was shot through with shoddy goods, from ramshackle housing, rickety buses, wobbly furniture and faulty electric wiring to flimsy windows. The State Planning Commission found that a mere fifth of all the steel produced in Beijing was first rate. Most was second or third rate, and over 20 per cent was classified as defective. In Henan more than half of all the steel produced in factories was third rate or worse. Inferior material churned out by the steel-producing giants had a knock-on effect for a whole range of related industries. At Angang, the sprawling steel and iron complex in Anshan, the rails produced in 1957 were generally of first-rate quality, but by 1960 a mere third corresponded to the requisite standards. As the quality of the rails suffered, several sections of the railway network became too dangerous for heavy traffic and had to be closed down; a few collapsed altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Not only did the quantity of inferior goods increase, but larger proportions of them found their way into society. In Henan only 0.25 per cent of the cement which did not fulfil production criteria actually left the premises in 1957. This ballooned to over 5 per cent in 1960, as large quantities of substandard material were used on building sites. A survey of a whole series of industries in Kaifeng, Henan, reached an even more astounding conclusion: more than 70 per cent of all the output consisted of reject products.<sup>10</sup>

And just as faulty rails, warped beams and fake cement perilously weakened the material structure of everyday life, inferior consumer goods became part and parcel of socialist culture. In Shanghai clocks sounded the alarm at random, enamel basins were sold with splits and bubbles on the surface, while half of all knitwear and cotton goods were defective.<sup>11</sup> In Wuhan zips jammed, knives bent and blades broke off the handles of agricultural tools.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes factories cut costs by churning out products without any identifying label. This was the case with a fifth of the tinned meat sold in Beijing. Sometimes the labels were wrong, for instance when fruit was substituted for pork, leading to large amounts of rotten goods.<sup>13</sup> Even more worrying were problems caused by the addition of chemicals to processed food. In one year a Beijing dye factory sold 120 tonnes of harmful pigments specifically designed as food additives. Many of these were banned, for instance Sudan yellow, a dye used in inks. Lax procedures over quality control also meant that contaminated food and medicine were allowed to leave the factory floor, one example being a batch of 78 million bottles of penicillin gone bad. A third was sent out from a Shanghai factory before the problem was even spotted.<sup>14</sup> Mao scoffed at the very notion of a defective product: 'there is no such thing as a reject product, one man's reject is another man's grain'.<sup>15</sup>

Mao may have dismissed concerns about quality, but a reject culture damaged the country's reputation on the international market. As we have seen, the cost of making good on the leaky batteries, contaminated eggs, infected meat, fake coal and other tainted merchandise delivered in 1959 alone amounted to 200 or 300 million yuan. But reject culture also corrupted the inner workings of military industry. As a report by Marshal He Long showed, it was not only assault rifles that failed to fire, but also nineteen jet fighters produced in Shenyang that were substandard. In Factory 908 well over 100,000 gas masks were unusable. Nie Rongzhen, who ran the nuclear weapons programme, in turn complained about the poor quality of wireless devices and measuring gauges, which were often unreliable because of dust particles trapped inside. Even in top-secret factories rubbish was found everywhere, and the slightest breeze blew the dirt resting on propaganda banners hanging on the wall on to sensitive equipment: 'The Americans doubt that we can make guided missiles because the Chinese are too dirty.'<sup>16</sup>

Living conditions for workers were appalling. Stupendous imports of foreign machinery were meant to catapult the country forward, as gleaming new plants, from steel mills and cement kilns to oil refineries, were purchased from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But very little was invested in the housing and feeding of ordinary workers and their families – despite the fact that the workforce exploded with the arrival of millions from the countryside.

Take the iron and steel plant in Jinan, the capital of Shandong. Established at the height of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 with the most technologically advanced equipment, it should have been a haven for its new recruits. But conditions deteriorated rapidly. There were inadequate toilet facilities, so workers urinated and defecated directly on the factory floor. Filth and stench permeated the premises, lice and scabies were common. Chaos reigned on the ground. Scuffles were a frequent occurrence, windows were broken and doors smashed in. A pecking order emerged in which the strongest workers grabbed the best beds in the dormitories. Fear was pervasive, in particular among women, who were commonly teased, humiliated and abused by local cadres in their offices, in their dormitories or sometimes on the factory floor in full view of other workers. None of them dared to sleep or go out on their own.<sup>17</sup>

A similar scene could be found in Nanjing. When the Federation of Trade Unions looked into the lives of iron, steel and coal workers in 1960, they found filthy canteens infected with insects and rodents. Queues were interminable, up to a thousand workers lining up in front of a single canteen window at the Lingshan Coal Mine. As the canteen was open for only an hour, workers would tussle and wrangle for space, sometimes coming to blows. In the Guantang Coal Mine, miners who were late were deprived of their meal, and had to go down the shafts for a ten-hour shift on an empty stomach. Dormitories were cramped. On average each worker had a space of 1 to 1.5 square metres, although some slept on boards jammed between beds or against the pillars.

Many rested in shifts, having to share a bed. Straw roofs would leak, forcing some of the workers to move their bunk beds around the dripping pools. Others slept under an umbrella. Protective equipment was either lacking or wholly inadequate. Many miners had no shoes and had no alternative but to go down the shafts barefoot. Those made to hew coal in open pits were drenched when it rained, their jackets soaked with water. In the dormitories there were no blankets, and the humidity was so high that clothes would never quite dry. Some of the steel workers who had to work in front of blast furnaces burned their feet because they had no shoes.<sup>18</sup>

Further south, in subtropical Guangzhou, the dormitories were so crowded that a bunk bed provided no more than half a square metre per worker. Shoddy construction work meant that the premises were hot and damp during the rainy season, causing mould to spread like a rash, infecting clothes and bedding. The humidity was such that some of the facilities were described as mere 'ponds', with water dripping from the walls to form puddles on the floor.<sup>19</sup> In the Quren coal mine, located near Shaoguan, workers cannibalised the pit props and mine timber to build furniture or provide heating. One in seven workers suffered from silicosis, also known as potter's rot, caused by inhalation of dust particles, as no protective masks were provided.<sup>20</sup>

The situation was no better in the north. In the capital itself, a detailed study of four factories by the Federation of Trade Unions showed that there were four times as many workers as before the Great Leap Forward, although dormitory space had failed to keep pace with the increase. In Changxindian, in the Fengtai district, a railway factory allocated just over half a square metre to each of its workers. Throughout Beijing, workers slept in storage rooms, libraries and even in air shelters, often on bunk beds arranged in three layers. They were packed like sardines, so tightly that there was no room to turn at night. In order to get through a door, workers had to queue up. The toilets were permanently engaged and more often than not blocked. Many would wrap their faeces in a sheet of newspaper and chuck the package through a window.

Few factories provided sufficient heating: one of the four enterprises inspected had none in the bitterly cold winter of 1958–9. Workers would resort to burning coal balls in small stoves, which resulted in several deaths from coal-gas poisoning. Influenza was common. Rubbish accumulated everywhere; theft was widespread. Bullying was rife, in particular in the case of new arrivals. In the Liulihe Cement Plant, separately inspected by the Federation of Trade Unions in March 1959, three canteens designed for a total of a thousand people had to provide for over 5,700 workers. Older workers were simply pushed aside by young men eager to jump the queue, many never eating anything but cold food.<sup>21</sup> A year later a similar investigation noted few changes, adding that 'hooliganism' – a criminal offence taken from the Soviet penal code and covering a wide range of acts such as foul language, destruction of property and illegal sexual behaviour – was common in dormitories. Workers used power and influence to upgrade from one bed to another, finding space for friends and family despite overcrowding.<sup>22</sup>

By 1961 up to half of the workforce in Beijing suffered from famine oedema.<sup>23</sup> Industrial diseases were common, some 40,000 workers having been exposed to silicon dust. A report written by the city's People's Congress estimated that one in ten workers suffered from a chronic disease.<sup>24</sup> The real situation was probably much worse.

Many new factories opened during the Great Leap Forward were described as 'run by the people' rather than 'run by the state'. They fared no better. Most were jerry-built affairs, quickly set up in buildings confiscated from the public and often inadequate for industrial production. One chemical workshop in Nanjing, put together in a residential dwelling, had a bamboo roof and paint peeling from mud walls. It employed some 275 workers. Radioactive waste permeated nooks and crannies, accumulated on the floor of the common room or lay in open vats, from where it was spread by wind and rain. Workers suffered from throat and nose irritations, as the protective equipment they were meant to wear was not used properly. The masks and gloves were often turned inside out, and were carried to the dormitories without thorough cleansing. Of the seventy-seven female workers medically inspected, eight were pregnant or breast feeding, although they were in contact with radioactive material for several hours daily. No showers were taken in the winter.<sup>25</sup>

This was not an isolated example. In the twenty-eight factories 'run by the people' in the Gulou district, the old centre of town where drums used to mark the night watches, rubbish was found everywhere. Ventilation was non-existent in the smaller concerns. Many of the workers were women who had joined during the Great Leap Forward. Most had no work experience and were given very little protective equipment, some only donning straw hats. Exposure to chemical components and silicon dust commonly caused red eyes, headaches, itches and rashes. Some of the women had the cartilage separating their nostrils eaten away by constant inhalation of chemicals. Heatstroke, with temperatures near the furnaces ranging from 38 to 46 degrees Celsius even in the

middle of the winter, was a frequent occurrence.<sup>26</sup> In a health check carried out on 450 women working in a factory producing electron tubes in Nanjing, more than a third suffered from lack of menstrual periods, a symptom of malnutrition. In the Nanjing Chemical Plant a quarter had tuberculosis, while one in two suffered from low blood pressure. Half had worms.<sup>27</sup>

However abysmal their living conditions, workers were better off than the farmers who produced the food they ate. But few could afford to support their families or remit money to the village many had left behind. Their salaries were eroded by inflation and depleted by food purchases, necessary to complement the meagre rations they were given in the canteen. In the Shijiazhuang Iron and Steel Company, workers spent three-quarters of their salaries on food.<sup>28</sup> In Nanjing many workers had to borrow money, incurring debts ranging from 30 to 200 yuan. Given the paltry salaries that most workers earned, these were crippling liabilities. A Grade Three worker made 43 yuan a month, although the food alone for a family of five cost 46 yuan. No savings were made in the canteen, where the fare was often poor and expensive.<sup>29</sup> But few people ever managed to rise to a Grade Three. The majority of salaries ranged from 12.7 to 22 yuan a month.<sup>30</sup> In the more deprived factories 'run by the people' over a third of the workforce were paid less than 10 yuan a month. Many had to borrow money or pawn the few personal items they had left, selling spare clothing during the summer only to shiver through the winter.<sup>31</sup>

And then came the medical fees, for which workers often had to pay. A close look at one chemical plant in Beijing in 1960 showed that hundreds of workers were in debt as a result of medical treatment. Chong Qingtian looked after his sick wife but owed some 1,700 yuan by the time she died. He was taken to court and was required to pay 20 yuan each month, leaving him with just over 40 yuan to live on. He was an excellent worker, but many were in a less enviable position, ending up being ruined by the medical fees incurred to treat illnesses caused by appalling working conditions.<sup>32</sup>

When all the problems inherent in the planned economy were taken into account – uncontrolled capital spending, enormous wastage, defective products, transportation bottlenecks, woeful labour discipline – the performance of most factories was dismal. The actual costs were difficult to calculate in the financial morass created by central planning. Not only did accountants cook the books, but sometimes they did not even know how to handle the sums. In Nanjing some forty large production units had a total of only fourteen accountants, of whom a mere six were able to keep track of the money. Many factories did not even maintain a log for outgoings and incomings, and nobody had the faintest idea of the costs incurred.<sup>33</sup>

But some approximations indicate the extent of the damage, as the example of steel, which is basically iron reinforced with carbon and hardening metals, shows. In Hunan 2.2 tonnes of iron were used to produce a tonne of steel, meaning enormous waste. The cost of making a tonne of steel was 1,226 yuan, which had to be sold at a state-mandated price of 250 yuan – or a loss of about 1,000 yuan per tonne. In 1959 the province lost about 4 million yuan each month on steel.<sup>34</sup> Better prepared to make steel in a cost-effective way were the technologically advanced mills and furnaces of Shijiazhuang. Founded in 1957, Shijiazhuang Iron and Steel made a profit before the Great Leap Forward, but soaring costs soon sent it plunging into the red. In 1958 a tonne of steel cost 112 yuan, turning a profit for the plant of some 16 million yuan. In 1959 the cost per tonne went up to 154 yuan, pushing the plant into a deficit of 23 million yuan, followed in 1960 by costs of 172 yuan per tonne and losses in excess of 40 million yuan. By that time the plant relied on a variety of poor iron ores coming from mines as far away as Hainan Island.<sup>35</sup>

As the losses started piling up, output collapsed. After several years of breakneck growth, the economy moved into a deep slump in 1961. The supply of coal – the fuel of modern industry – dried up. In the coal mines the equipment had been so badly treated during the Great Leap Forward that most of it was defective. New machinery often did not last longer than six months on account of the low-grade brittle steel used in its production. The miners themselves were leaving in droves, disgusted at the soaring cost of food and housing, fed up with the shortages of such basic items as soap, uniforms and rubber shoes.<sup>36</sup> And even if the coal was hauled out of the mines, fuel shortages consigned much of it to pile up unused. The four big coal mines in Guangdong province produced some 1.7 million tonnes of coal in 1959 but managed to transport less than a million.<sup>37</sup> In Gansu the radical leadership of Zhang Zhongliang made sure that coal production soared from 1.5 million tonnes in 1958 to 7.3 million tonnes in 1960, at considerable human cost, but after the petrol ran out some 2 million tonnes were abandoned in the mines.<sup>38</sup>

Table 9: Industrial Output for Hunan Province (million yuan)

1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
1,819	2,959	4,023	4,542	2,426	2,068

Source: Hunan, 1964, 187-1-1260.

As coal production plummeted, factories around the country came to a standstill. In Shanghai in December 1960 the China Machinery Plant worked at a third of its capacity because of a lack of electricity. The Number One Cotton Mill had 2,000 workers idle all day long.<sup>39</sup> In the first half of 1961 the mandated amount of coal delivered to Shanghai was decreased by 15 per cent, but a third of that reduced amount was never actually delivered. Close to half of all the iron and timber needed to feed the city’s heavy industry was missing as well.<sup>40</sup> Because it was an industrial centre of strategic importance, Shanghai was given the highest priority by the planners. The situation was worse elsewhere, as the shortcomings of the economy spiralled out of control. In Shaoguan, the heavy-industry city of Guangdong, a survey of thirty-two state enterprises in the summer of 1961 showed that production had nosedived, with soap down by 52 per cent on the previous year, bricks by 53 per cent, pig iron by 80 per cent, matches by 36 per cent, leather shoes by 65 per cent. In the shoe factory each worker produced one pair a day where three had been made before the Great Leap Forward.<sup>41</sup> Table 9 shows what happened in the whole of Hunan province. These figures refer only to output, which more than doubled from 1957 to 1960, only to be halved again in the following two years. Had the cost of this obsession with quantity over quality been calculated, it would have pointed to a disaster of gargantuan proportions, inversely commensurate with the ambitions of the master plan. But no factories went bankrupt: that was a capitalist phenomenon associated with the boom-and-bust cycles that the planned economy was designed to avoid.



## Trade

Many goods never reached the shops. The Bank of China calculated that some 300 million yuan was missing in Hunan in 1960 as a result of fake receipts, goods lost en route, sold on credit without permission or simply misappropriated. That was just in one province. At a national level the State Council estimated that some 7 billion yuan in funds was held that year by state factories instead of contributing to the circulation of goods.<sup>1</sup> At every level of the distribution network, corruption and mismanagement took their share, nibbling away at the supply of goods that the plan had allocated to the people.

When goods actually managed to leave the workshop floor, their first call was in a depot, where special storage companies accredited by the state sorted them according to their final destinations. In the Storage and Transportation Company in Shanghai, hundreds of objects worth well over 100,000 yuan – telephones, refrigerators, medical equipment, cranes – accumulated in boxes because of sloppy paperwork, incorrect accounts and illegible inventories. A hundred vats of shrimp paste rotted outside in the rain for a month, the documents having gone astray and the company having forgotten all about them. But, above all, goods vanished because the profit motive never quite disappeared: what was 'lost' could be traded privately on the black market.<sup>2</sup>

Then there was the wait for a train or a lorry. China was a poor agrarian country that never had the capacity to send goods and supplies from one end of the realm to the other, and the flow was rapidly dislocated by a crumbling transportation system. As early as the end of 1958 the economy ground to a halt, and mountains of goods were heaped everywhere about stations and ports. Each day some 38,000 freight vehicles were required by the plan, but only 28,000 were available. Having inspected only the loading areas along the coast north of Shanghai, the planners found that a million tonnes of material was waiting for transport.<sup>3</sup>

Lack of equipment, spare parts and fuel only made the situation worse over the next three years. By 1960 in Tianjin, Beijing, Hankou, Guangzhou and other cities, goods entering the railway stations exceeded those leaving by an amount equivalent to 10,000 tonnes each and every day. Much of this was simply piled up in makeshift storage facilities, which reached a quarter of a million tonnes by mid-October. In Dalian 70,000 tonnes of uncollected freight languished in the station, while hundreds of tonnes of expensive imported rubber had been lying around the port of Qinhuangdao for six months. In the transportation hub of Zhengzhou a ditch six metres deep was dug to dump goods, from cement bags to machinery. Much of it was damaged, a forlorn mound of bags and bundles, crates, barrels and drums.<sup>4</sup> In Shanghai, by the summer of 1961, goods estimated to be worth 280 million yuan had accumulated in canteens, dormitories and even on the streets, including 120 million metres of much-needed cotton. Much of the stock simply rotted or rusted away.<sup>5</sup>

Such was the breakdown in the transportation system that trains had to queue for their turn to enter a station. Both the tools and the manpower to move cargo were lacking. Brand-new unloading equipment turned out to be defective, a problem compounded by the fact that 100,000 porters and haulers had hastily been made redundant to save on salaries. Logistics and co-ordination were not among the strengths of the planned economy.<sup>6</sup> To this had to be added a lack of incentives and downright hunger. Engine drivers, normally pampered by the regime, had generally been entitled to a personal allowance of some 25 kilos of grain a month in the past, but this was lowered to 15 kilos. In Dahushan, Liaoning, the grain was substituted by sorghum or millet, while in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, half of the monthly ration was delivered in sweet potatoes. Workers did the bare minimum, besides being weakened by poor diet.<sup>7</sup> The mayhem also affected international shipping. Lost income as a consequence of chartered ships having to wait for days on end in the main ports of China alone amounted to £300,000.<sup>8</sup>

Local networks also collapsed. In Yunnan before 1958, more than 200,000 mules and donkeys carried food, clothes and supplies to the many villages tucked away in the mountains. They were replaced by horse carts, which grew from a mere 3,000 to well over 30,000. But horses cost far more in fodder, and they were badly managed by state enterprises, many dying during the famine. Carthorses, moreover, were ill suited to negotiate the steep mountain paths and rugged landscapes of the southern province, leaving many of the small villages

isolated.<sup>9</sup>

Lorries foundered. Yunnan was given only half the petrol it needed in 1960, and by September some 1,500 were running on alternative fuels, from charcoal to lignite as well as sugarcane and ethanol.<sup>10</sup> In Hunan vegetable oil instead of machine oil was added to engines, causing widespread damage.<sup>11</sup> Even in Shanghai motorised rickshaws were taken off the streets while many of the buses changed to gas, some of it carried in enormous improvised gunny bags rather than in cylinders.<sup>12</sup> Neglect also undermined deliveries. The Vehicle Transport Company in Guangzhou, for instance, boasted forty cars, most of them acquired since the Great Leap Forward. Of these three had already been ruined by 1961, while an average of twenty-five were in repair around the clock, leaving about a dozen in use.<sup>13</sup> As the vehicles were pushed to the limit in the race to fulfil a faltering plan, the actual running costs increased. In 1957, by one estimate, a car cost just 2.2 yuan per 100 kilometres in spare parts and replacements, but 9.7 yuan by 1961. The main reason was constant use and poor maintenance.<sup>14</sup>

All manner of goods were delivered to the door in pre-revolutionary China, carried in baskets swung from a shoulder pole, carted on wheelbarrows or occasionally in donkey panniers. Itinerant traders reached even isolated villages in the hinterland, carrying cloth, crockery, baskets, coal, toys, candy and nuts as well as cigarettes, soap and lotions. In the cities vendors thronged the streets, offering every possible item from socks, handkerchiefs, towels and soap to women's underwear.

When hawkers and traders gathered at regular intervals at an agreed location in the countryside, a periodic market emerged: a multitude of farmers, craftsmen and traders, all with their goods on back or cart, swarmed into a silent hamlet which was transformed into a busy scene with wares sold by the wayside or displayed on temporary stalls. In the towns and cities, hundreds of boutiques, shops, bazaars and department stores competed for attention, from hatters, shoemakers and drapers to photographers, all mixing with fortune-tellers, magicians, acrobats and wrestlers to offer amusement and commerce.

While traditional shops were low and open with the living quarters above, new department stores were towers of commerce, monuments of trade standing tall above the surrounding buildings. They could be found in every large city, illuminated at night with rows of electric lights, offering local and imported goods ranging from American canned sardines to child-size motor cars. The striking contrast between the elaborate department stores and traditional single-storey shops, often only next door, was typical of the diversity that ran through the whole structure of everyday life in the republican era.<sup>15</sup>

Most of this busy, bustling world vanished after 1949. Free trade was replaced by a planned economy. Markets were closed down. Spontaneous gatherings were forbidden. Hawkers and pedlars were taken off the streets, often forced into collective enterprises controlled by the state. The itinerant trader and the once ubiquitous blacksmith became relics of the past. Department stores were nationalised, their steady supply of goods from all over the world drying up and being replaced by state-mandated goods produced in state-owned enterprises to be sold at state-mandated prices. The owners of small shops were forced to become government employees. Mikhail Klochko remembered going to an obscure little store with hardly any goods at all in Beijing. He bought a pencil box out of pity for the wan shopkeeper and his two sickly children.<sup>16</sup> The only prosperous shops were near the tourist hotels in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, offering furs, enamelware, watches, jewellery, embroidered silk pictures of landscapes and portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. Called Friendship Stores, they were reserved for foreign visitors and elite party members.

For ordinary people the choice was dire. Take the example of Nanjing, a once flourishing city on the south bank of the Yangzi which had served as the capital of the republic. Although the government clamped down on the free market, there were still well over 700 shops on the eve of the Great Leap Forward, selling their wares directly to the public. By 1961 a mere 130 had survived. Where a sophisticated network of manufacturers, traders and retailers had linked the city with some seventy counties and over forty cities across the country, the advent of rigid collectivisation led to a turning inward, as a mere six counties and three cities contributed to the local handicraft industry. As the plan replaced the market, the range of handicraft products halved to about 1,200. Even well-known heritage brands, from Golden Chicken hairpins to Yangzi River spring locks, buckled under the weight of the state. Variety in design suffered. Whereas some 120 different locks had been available before 1958, by 1961 only a dozen survived. Most were so similar that one key could open several padlocks. But prices for all products were higher, generally by about a third, in some cases double.<sup>17</sup> The same could be said



of foodstuffs. Since the launch of the Great Leap Forward some 2,000 food pedlars had been forced to change jobs in Nanjing. Previously individual hawkers had an intimate knowledge of complex market conditions and efficiently transported the vegetables to key delivery points in the city, but now a clumsy and rigid command economy only compounded the problems caused by famine in the countryside.<sup>18</sup>

The trade in surplus goods and waste material, thriving before 1949, also disintegrated. Lauding the widespread practice of recycling every conceivable object, Dyer Ball observed before the fall of the empire that poverty encouraged care to be given to the most insignificant trifle, turning everybody into a merchant.<sup>19</sup> But the exact opposite happened during the famine: obsession with a master plan produced mountains of waste on the ground, since few people were given any incentives to recycle. In Guangzhou some 170 tonnes of waste material – from iron oxide to graphite powder – was heaped about the city in the summer of 1959. Before the Great Leap Forward, every scrap of metal or shred of cloth would have been recycled by a small army of independent pedlars, who made sure that rags, cans, plastic, paper and tyres reached a potential buyer. Many abandoned the trade after they had been forced to enrol in a large and unresponsive collective.<sup>20</sup>

While the rubbish accumulated, shortages of the most basic necessities became endemic. In Nanjing everything was scarce by the summer of 1959, even ordinary objects such as shoes and pots.<sup>21</sup> Queues – the hallmark of socialism – were part of everyday life. As famine set in, they grew longer. In Jinan some factory workers took two days off work to wait in line to buy grain. Li Shujun queued for three days but failed even to get a ticket, which had to be exchanged for a number, which in turn had to be exchanged for grain – all in different queues.<sup>22</sup> In Shanghai too working men and women had to queue for the few goods which reached the shops. The ritual started before daybreak, as everybody knew that the shops would be empty by the afternoon.<sup>23</sup> Patience could wear thin. Fights broke out when some people used bricks to mark their place in a queue and these were then kicked over by others.<sup>24</sup> In Wuhan, where up to 200 people had to wait in a single queue all night to buy rice towards the end of 1960, tempers flared and scuffles erupted.<sup>25</sup>

The state rather than the market determined the price of goods. This was supposed to stabilise prices and enhance the purchasing power of the people. But farmers bought manufactured goods at inflated prices, although they were forced to sell grain and other foodstuffs to the state at rock-bottom prices – often so low that they made a loss, as we have seen. A colossal transfer of wealth took place from the countryside to the cities. A sense of the scale of this was indicated by Lan Ling, an official with the inspectorate in Qingdao. By compiling and adjusting the prices paid for food and goods since 1949, he found that the price for coal had increased by 18.5 per cent, soap by 21.4 per cent, shoes by up to 53 per cent, rope by 55 per cent, household goods by up to 157 per cent and ordinary tools by up to 225 per cent. In contrast the price paid by the state for grain had actually decreased, ranging from 4.5 per cent for wheat to 10.5 per cent for maize.<sup>26</sup>

Prices fixed by the state were rarely respected, if only because all sorts of additional charges could be made. A detailed investigation by the People's Congress in Guangzhou found that there could be up to forty different transfer prices for the exact same type of metal bar. In the steel and iron industry many of the prices actually charged were 50 per cent higher than those mandated by the state. In some cases the price rocketed by a factor of ten, contributing to a slump in industrial production as company managers had a hard time adjusting a rigid budget to the violent fluctuations in the supply costs. The price of coal, too, was fixed, but private deals struck between different enterprises led to relentless upward pressure. The actual cost of production thus soared, forcing the state to subsidise industries even further by trying to keep the prices of finished goods down. This too failed, as just about everything became more expensive yet increasingly shoddy, from glass bottles and mothballs to hairpins and wooden clogs.<sup>27</sup> In Wuhan, as everywhere else, the cost of a water bucket, an iron kettle or a small fruit knife had doubled in a year or so since the launch of the Great Leap Forward. In the smelting capital of the new China, an iron pot cost twenty-two yuan when five yuan would have sufficed in 1957.<sup>28</sup> As Li Fuchun acknowledged in the summer of 1961, annual inflation was at least 10 per cent for everything from food and commodities to services, but it reached 40 to 50 per cent in some places. Some 12.5 billion yuan was squandered on goods worth only 7 billion.<sup>29</sup>

Other side effects of the planned economy appeared, because the profit motive rather than selfless dedication to the people's needs always lurked just under the surface of the paper plan. In the midst of humanity's greatest famine, a whole range of deluxe products were sold at a premium, from vegetables, cinema tickets and tea leaves to simple pails. State-owned enterprises used widespread shortages to upgrade some of their goods

and boost profits.<sup>30</sup> When the People's Congress of Beijing decided to have a close look at the Beijing Department Store, the Stalinist flagship on Wangfujing, it found out how enterprises responded to inflationary pressure rather than to consumer demand. In 1958 around 10 per cent of all underwear in the store was in the higher price bracket. The bulk, 60 per cent, consisted of mid-range products accessible to most city dwellers. In 1961 more than half were luxury items, with a mere third carrying a mid-range price tag. This structural change came on top of inflation, which was estimated at 2.7 per cent each month.<sup>31</sup>

As state-owned behemoths replaced small shops, the responsibility for defective goods shifted away from the street towards remote and impenetrable bureaucracies.<sup>32</sup> The plan, of course, had an answer to this problem, setting up 'service stations' (fuwuzu) for the benefit of the great masses. But they were few and far between, unable to cope with a deluge of shoddy goods and, most of all, utterly uninterested in serving the people. So in a poor country the cost of fixing an object often exceeded the cost of replacing it. In Wuhan the expense of having shoes resoled, pots repaired or keys cut was double the state-mandated prices, as service stations effectively enjoyed a monopoly over repair work. In Xiangtan, Hunan, it cost eight yuan to repair a fire pot but only nine yuan to buy a new one, while in many regions the cost of having socks darned was about the same as buying a new pair.<sup>33</sup> Over the winter of 1960–1, as everybody was shivering from fuel shortages and inadequate clothing, repair centres in the capital were buried beneath heaps of defective goods. Apathetic employees merely pushed the stuff around, lacking the incentives, the tools and the supplies to tackle their jobs. Even simple nails to resole a pair of shoes were unavailable. In the Qianmen commune, in the heart of the capital, some sixty stoves lay about rotting. Broken furniture was strewn about the place, which was short of saws, planes and chisels.<sup>34</sup>

Even when service stations undertook to launder clothes, what should have been a relatively straightforward matter became caught in a hopeless quagmire. A cumbersome bureaucracy involved a whole series of separate steps, from registering the items and issuing a receipt to handing out the washed clothes, all these operations being performed by different people, involving a third of the workforce. Those who actually did the washing rarely managed more than ten items a day. Everything was run at a loss and charged to the state, despite the high prices. On Shantou Road, Shanghai, a small laundry paid 140 yuan in salaries each month, although it made only about 100 yuan a month in income, not counting numerous lost items of clothing that had to be compensated for.<sup>35</sup> Of course most ordinary people would have preferred to repair their clothes, shoes and furniture themselves, but their tools had been taken away during the iron and steel campaign. Lao Tian remembered that in Xushui – one of the country's model communes – for several years his mother had to queue up to borrow the only needle that had not been confiscated in the neighbourhood.<sup>36</sup>

## Housing

Every dictator needs a square. Military parades are at the heart of state rituals in communist regimes: power is evinced by a show of military might, with leaders gathering on the rostrum to greet the cadenced tread of thousands of marching soldiers and model workers, while jet fighters scream and whine overhead. Stalin had the Resurrection Gate on Red Square bulldozed and Kazan Cathedral demolished in order to make room for heavy tanks to clatter past Lenin's tomb. Mao was Khrushchev's guest of honour at the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, celebrated in Red Square in 1957, but he had no intention of lagging behind his rival. Tiananmen Square had to be bigger, he decided: was China not the most populous nation on earth?<sup>1</sup> The square was expanded to hold 400,000 people in 1959, as a maze of medieval walls, gates and roads were levelled to create a vast concrete area the size of sixty football fields.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of Tiananmen Square was one of ten gigantic achievements designed to overawe Khrushchev at the tenth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution, to be celebrated in October 1959 in the presence of hundreds of foreign guests – one edifice for each year of liberation. A brand-new railway station, capable of handling 200,000 passengers a day, was built in a matter of months. A Great Hall of the People appeared on the western side of Tiananmen Square, a Museum of Chinese History on the eastern side. The Zhonghua Gate was erased to make room for the Monument to the People's Heroes, a granite obelisk some thirty-seven metres high at the centre of the square.

The leadership bragged to the foreign press eagerly anticipating the anniversary that sufficient new buildings had been erected to give the capital a total of thirty-seven square kilometres of new floor space – more than fourteen times that of all the office buildings put up in Manhattan since the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> It was an empty boast, as Beijing was turned into a giant Potemkin village designed to fool foreign visitors. But there was no denying that the party was spellbound by a vision in which soaring skyscrapers of steeped glass and concrete would transform Beijing overnight, relegating to oblivion the shameful mud huts and grey brick houses clustered along narrow lanes. Plans were drawn up for the systematic destruction of the entire city within ten years. At one point even the Imperial Palace was threatened by the wrecking ball.<sup>4</sup> Tens of thousands of houses, offices and factories were pulled down, as the capital became a giant building site permanently covered in dust. Foreign embassy staff were taken aback by the rate of demolition, as some of the buildings that were pulverised had only recently been completed. 'The general picture is one of chaos,' commented an observer. All work was concentrated in Tiananmen Square, while elsewhere long-established building sites were deserted.<sup>5</sup> More often than not pillars and beams went up for the first and second floor, and were then abandoned because of shortages of materials, leaving skeletal frames to stand forlorn as so many monuments to delusion.<sup>6</sup>

While most of the prestige buildings were ready in time for the October 1959 celebrations, they came at considerable cost. The planners were effective at creating an illusion of order on paper, but chaos reigned on the ground. In a fitting tribute to the folly of the Great Leap Forward, defective steel was incorporated into the party's new nerve centre. Close to 1,700 tonnes of the steel beams used for the Great Hall of the People were either bent out of shape or insufficiently thick. Threaded steel produced in Tianjin was so weak that it had to be discarded. Across the square thousands of bags of cement were wasted, while a third of the equipment used on the building site was routinely out of order. And even at the heart of power, the party could not get more than three-quarters of the workforce to arrive on time in the morning. When they finally got to their posts, many slacked and skimped. A team of twenty carpenters called in from Wenzhou took three days to install fifteen window casements. Only one actually fitted.<sup>7</sup>

Across the country vast amounts of money were lavished on prestige buildings. Stadiums, museums, hotels and auditoria were built specifically to mark the tenth anniversary of liberation in 1959. In Harbin 5 million yuan was spent on a National Day Hotel, more than the total cost of the Beijing Hotel. A further 7 million was thrown at a National Day Stadium. In Tianjin, too, a National Day Stadium was planned, with seats to hold 80,000 spectators. Stadiums went up in Taiyuan and Shenyang, among other cities. Jiangsu decided to allocate 20 million yuan to National Day projects.<sup>8</sup>

Every local dictator, it seemed, wanted to have his ten pet projects in slavish imitation of the capital. The accoutrements of power in Beijing were widely duplicated at lower levels, as many leaders aspired to become a smaller version of Mao Zedong. Another reason was that officials were accountable to their bosses higher up in Beijing, not to the people below them. Big, tangible structures and flashy projects were a sure way to foster the illusion of effective governance. In Lanzhou, the capital of impoverished Gansu, provincial boss Zhang Zhongliang pushed for ten big edifices, although this rapidly spiralled up to sixteen schemes, including a People's Hall designed to be exactly half the size of the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square, a People's Square, an East Railway Station, a Culture Palace for Workers, a Culture Palace for Minorities, a stadium, a library and a luxury hotel, as well as new buildings for the provincial committee, the provincial People's Congress, a Television Tower and a central park. The cost was set at 160 million yuan. Thousands of houses were destroyed, leaving many of the inhabitants homeless in the middle of the winter. Very little was achieved. After construction work was stopped in the wake of Zhang Zhongliang's fall from power in December 1960, nothing but rubble remained in the centre of the city.<sup>9</sup> Dozens of other prestige buildings were also started without any sort of approved plan. One example was a brand-new Friendship Hotel for foreign experts. The number of guests was misjudged by a factor of three, so that in the end the 170 foreigners were given an average of sixty square metres of luxurious accommodation while villagers were dying of cold and hunger just outside Lanzhou. After the recall of Soviet experts the building was eerily quiet.<sup>10</sup>

A step further down the ladder of power was the commune, and there was no shortage of radical leaders willing to transform them into models of communist utopia. In Huaminglou, where Liu Shaoqi was born, party secretary Hu Renqin initiated his own ten construction projects. These included a 'pig city', a giant pig shed stretching for ten kilometres along the main road. Many hundreds of houses set back from the street were destroyed to make room for the project. Stopping here on an inspection tour in April 1961, as we have seen, Liu Shaoqi found nothing but a few dozen scrawny animals. A water pavilion was built on the lake, as well as a large reception hall for visiting officials. In the meantime, half a million kilos of grain rotted in the fields. The death rate in some teams was as high as 9 per cent in 1960.<sup>11</sup> All over the country similar monuments to party extravagance appeared. In Diaofang commune, Guangdong, where thousands starved to death, some eighty houses were ripped up for timber and bricks, all of which were earmarked for a People's Hall spacious enough to convene a gathering of 1,500 people.<sup>12</sup>

In the three years up to September 1961, a total of 99.6 billion yuan was spent on capital construction, to which had to be added a further 9.2 billion in housing projects ostensibly earmarked for ordinary people. Most of the money ended up being invested in prestige buildings and offices with no tangible benefit for anyone but party members.<sup>13</sup> But that did not take into account all sorts of accounting tricks used to fund even more construction. In Guizhou the Zunyi region appropriated some 4 million yuan of state funds, including financial assistance for the poor, to indulge in a building spree, sprucing up leading cities with new buildings, dancing halls, photo studios, private toilets and elevators. In Tongzi county funding reserved for six middle schools was embezzled to set up a brand-new theatre.<sup>14</sup> Li Fuchun, on reviewing the many billions spent on prestige projects without state approval, felt sheer despair: 'People cannot eat their fill and we are still building skyscrapers – how can we communists have the heart to do that! Does it still look like communism? Is it not empty talk when we go on all day long about the interests of the masses?'<sup>15</sup>

As private property became a thing of the past, collective units moved into the mansions that had once been the pride and joy of the moneyed elite. As a sense of ownership evaporated, no one individual being held accountable for any one property, a form of destruction appeared that was more insidious than the muffled thud of the sledgehammer. Once one of the most magnificent estates in Shanghai, Huaihai Middle Road nos 1154–1170 were taken over by an electric machinery unit in November 1958. In less than a year the windows were broken, the marble and ceramic tiles were smashed, and the building was stripped and gutted of expensive imported kitchen equipment, its heating system, the fridge and all the toilets. Stench permeated the premises, and rubbish was strewn all over the compound. The army was just as careless. Once it had claimed control of a garden villa on Fenyang Road, the place was left to crumble. The staircase fell apart, railings were broken, the chimney collapsed, all removable property was stolen, the trees in the garden died and the lotus pond turned into a smelly swamp. After a manor on Hongqiao Road had been occupied by the air force, the floorboards were broken up, the water taps and electricity switches dismantled, while the toilet overflowed with faeces. There



were many other examples, 'too many to be enumerated', according to a report by the housing authorities.<sup>16</sup>

Lack of maintenance spread beyond individual houses. In Wuhan termites literally ate their way through many old buildings. In Station Street, half of one thousand buildings were infested. No. 14 Renhe Street simply caved in on its inhabitants. Architectural landmarks such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in Hankou were in danger of being overrun by vermin.<sup>17</sup>

Places of worship were no exception. Religion had no place in the people's communes: churches, temples and mosques were turned into workshops, canteens and dormitories. In Zhengzhou, eighteen out of all twenty-seven places of worship for Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists and Muslims were taken over, and a further 680 rooms privately rented out by religious congregations were confiscated. The city was proud to announce by 1960 that the number of Christian and Muslim worshippers had shrunk from 5,500 to a mere 377. All eighteen religious leaders now participated in 'productive labour' – except for three who had died.<sup>18</sup>

Destruction also extended to historic monuments. In Qujiang, Guangdong, the tomb of Zhang Jiuling, the famous Tang-dynasty minister, was damaged by a people's commune digging for treasures, while a Ming-dynasty Buddhist temple in Shaoguan was torn down for building material. Further south in Guangdong a cannon built by Lin Zexu to fight the British during the Opium War was blown up and used as scrap iron.<sup>19</sup> In Dujiangyan, Sichuan, the scene of an irrigation system dating back to the third century AD, a string of ancient temples were dismantled and burned for fuel.<sup>20</sup> The Erwang temple, abounding in cultural relics and surrounded by ancient trees, was declared an historical monument in 1957 – and partly blown up with explosives a few years later.<sup>21</sup> In the north the Great Wall of China was plundered for building material, while bricks from the Ming Tombs were carted away with the approval of local party secretaries. A stretch of wall measuring forty metres long and nine metres high at Dingling Tomb, where the Yongle Emperor was buried, was razed to the ground, while hundreds of cubic metres were dug from the Baocheng Tomb, also known as the Precious Hall. 'Bricks belong to the masses' was the clinching argument.<sup>22</sup>

City walls too were an object of official wrath. Their crenellated parapets, erstwhile symbols of imperial grandeur, overgrown with vines and shrubbery, were now seen as monuments to backwardness. Mao Zedong set the tone, pointing out at the Nanning conference in January 1958 that the walls around Beijing should be destroyed. Large sections of the vermilion gates and walls would be taken down in the following years. Other cities followed suit: parts of the wall that girdled the old city of Nanjing were dismantled by collective units in search of building material.<sup>23</sup>

But most of the devastation was in the countryside. Destruction came in waves. As we have seen, buildings were torn down to provide nutrients for the soil during the fertiliser campaign in early 1958. To allow a continuous revolution to take hold, buildings were used as a source of fuel: as farmers ploughed deep furrows throughout the night, bonfires flared and sparkled. Then, as the people's communes were established, private property was turned into offices, meeting halls, canteens, nurseries or kindergartens. Some were stripped for building material, others torn down to make way for a vision of modernity that never quite managed to migrate from paper to the village. With the drive to produce more iron and steel, metal window frames and door knobs were stripped, then the floorboards were taken for fuel. When the Great Leap Forward acquired a second life after the summer of 1959, the militia went from house to house searching for hidden grain as if it were a weapon of insurrection, breaking through walls, prodding the floor for hidden holes, digging up cellars, often taking down part or all of the building as compensation. As famine set in, the villagers themselves started cannibalising their homes, either bartering the bricks for food or burning the wood for fuel. If the thatch on the roofs had not yet been consumed by fire, it was taken down and eaten in desperation. Villagers also ate the plaster from the walls.

At best people were compelled to make a 'voluntary' contribution, as happened in a village in Xinhui, Guangdong, where each household was asked for thirty bricks towards a new school. As local cadres 'borrowed' more and more building material there was no house left in the end.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes villagers were compensated for their contributions. One villager in Sichuan dared to ask for both a tea cup and a towel in exchange for half a straw hut. He was given the tea cup. A neighbour received a small washbasin for four rooms.<sup>25</sup>

But most of the time coercion was the order of the day in the village. In Guangdong, where Zhao Ziyang pioneered an anti-hiding campaign in early 1959, the militia confiscated everything from a single peanut to entire mansions.<sup>26</sup> In Longgui commune, Shaoguan, party secretary Lin Jianhua abolished private property,

sending the militia on a rampage through the villages. In a typical team of eighty-five households, some fifty-six rooms and outdoor toilets were sequestered. Farmers were tied up and beaten if they refused to follow orders.<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to estimate how much was destroyed. The situation varied tremendously from place to place, but overall the Great Leap Forward constitutes, by far, the greatest demolition of property in human history. As a rough approximation between 30 and 40 per cent of all houses were turned into rubble. Here is what Liu Shaoqi, the head of state, wrote to Chairman Mao on 11 May 1959, after having spent a month investigating the region of his birth: 'According to comrades from the provincial party committee 40 per cent of all houses in Hunan have been destroyed. Besides this there is also a portion that has been appropriated by state organs, enterprises, communes and brigades.'<sup>28</sup> The number of people per room in Hunan doubled during the years of the Great Leap Forward, as entire families crowded into a single room the size of a wardrobe – despite the space created by the loss of several million people to starvation.<sup>29</sup> In Sichuan the situation was worse, with families living in toilets or under the eaves of somebody else's house. In Yanyuan (near Xichang), an area dominated by the Yi, a minority people who lived scattered in mountain areas, the situation was dire after thousands of houses were handed over to the state: 'According to statistics 1,147 families share one room with another family, 629 families share one room with three or four other families, 100 families share one room with five or more families.'<sup>30</sup> In the province as a whole, the rate of destruction varied from 45 to 70 per cent in some of the most affected counties.<sup>31</sup>

Many never found a new home, surviving as well as they could on the margins of society, seeking temporary accommodation in ragged shacks cobbled together from debris or living in pig sheds. In the Huanggang region of Hubei, where temperatures dropped to freezing, about 100,000 families had no home in the winter of 1960–1. Half of the population there had no firewood for heating, and people had to survive the bitter cold wearing miserable rags.<sup>32</sup>

A special group of victims were displaced by the irrigation and reservoir schemes launched during the Great Leap Forward. There were several million of them. In Hunan alone well over half a million people were evacuated.<sup>33</sup> A third of a million, if not more, were evicted as each of the giant projects were started at the Three Gate Gorge in Henan, Xin'anjiang in Zhejiang and Danjiangkou in Hubei.<sup>34</sup> In the Zhanjiang region in Guangdong, some 300,000 houses were needed for evacuee families by the end of 1961.<sup>35</sup>

Most were moved without much planning and generally without compensation. In Yueyang county, Hunan, some 22,000 people lost their homes during the building of Tieshan Reservoir. The bricks, furniture, tools and cattle of the villages to be inundated by the reservoir were commandeered and used to set up a collective farm in the mountains, to which the displaced people were relegated by the county authorities. Marooned in the mountains, without arable land to survive on and with all ties to their home villages cut off, they found life miserable, and many started flocking back to the plain. Then the reservoir project was abandoned. Most of the evacuees decided to return home, but were left stranded in ghost towns from which every removable asset had been stripped. They sought shelter in makeshift huts, outdoor toilets, pig sheds and even caves, some of which periodically collapsed and buried their occupants. Many had to beg or steal to get by, sharing a few cooking utensils and surviving on a paltry ration of 10 kilos of grain a month. Few had any padded clothes or blankets for the winter.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the displaced people roamed the countryside, but some eventually returned home, pulled by ties to their native place. About a hundred kilometres north-east of Beijing, set in a picturesque valley with chestnut, pear and crab-apple orchards against the wooded mountains, the residents of some sixty-five villages were uprooted to make way for the Miyun Reservoir, built between September 1958 and June 1959. As many as 57,000 people lost their homes. As if this were not bad enough, local cadres requisitioned all the tools and stole the furniture. Farmers who resisted were locked up. Only a quarter of the villagers were relocated, but the makeshift camps were so confined that their inhabitants referred to them as 'pig sheds'.

Two years later many were still traipsing homeless and adrift in the countryside. In March 1961, a group of 1,500 families returned home, men, women and children shuffling along dirt roads, carrying in ragged bundles and shabby bags whatever clothes and belongings they had managed to salvage. A few went back to their original villages – the reservoir was still without water – and built mud huts or slept in the open.<sup>37</sup> Millions of such refugees lived in similar squalor all over the country.

The dead were also evicted. This flew in the face of a deep-rooted concern with the afterlife, expressed through complex mourning practices, funeral rites and ancestor rituals. Burial was the preferred means of dealing with a corpse, as the body was seen as a valued gift to be placed whole under the soil near one's ancestral village. Mutual obligations were thought to exist between ancestral souls and their descendants. The dead had specific needs that had to be respected. At funerals spirit money was burned, as well as a whole array of goods, from furniture to entire houses, all made of paper and designed to help the deceased to settle in the hereafter. The coffin had to be airtight. Graves had to be swept, and food and gifts regularly offered to ancestors.<sup>38</sup>

Some of these practices were observed during the Great Leap Forward. As much as the party decried popular religion as superstition, some local cadres indulged in expensive burials. For the burial of his grandmother one official in Hebei summoned a funeral band of thirty musicians. A canteen was commandeered for the occasion, 120 guests being treated to wine and cigarettes – in the midst of the famine. As if this could not quite assuage his grief, Li Jianjian had the remains of his parents, buried some five years earlier, exhumed, transferred to new coffins and reburied. Li Yongfu, the deputy party secretary of a knitting factory in Beijing, not only erected a tent with electric lighting to welcome a funeral band, but also burned a paper car, a paper cow and paper militia to assist the passage of his mother to the next world. Five monks chanted scriptures.<sup>39</sup>

But many of the burial places were destroyed, for stone, timber or even fertiliser. In Hunan, for instance, gravestones were taken to build a dam, and party activists set the example by destroying the resting places of their own ancestors. In Yueyang, in hundreds of desecrated graves, bones stuck out of the coffins.<sup>40</sup> Wei Shu remembered in an interview how he was made to erase graves in the Sichuan countryside: 'You know, graves for dead people, they usually look like little hills. We had to flatten them, that was one of the things we had to do in 1958. At night, we were ordered to go around to destroy the graveyards and turn them into farming land.'<sup>41</sup> In many parts of the country agricultural land occupied by ancestral graves was systematically reclaimed. In Beijing the crematoriums worked full time during the Great Leap Forward. In 1958 over 7,000 bodies were cremated, almost three times more than in 1956, and twenty times more than in 1952. A third of these corpses had been disinterred to make way for agriculture.<sup>42</sup>

But in the countryside the authorities did not always bother to cremate the bodies that they had unearthed in their frantic search for timber. As a restricted publication edited by the secretarial office of the State Council noted, in Mouping, Shandong, local cadres used corpses to fertilise the land: 'they have tossed a few not yet fully decomposed bodies on to the crops'. An elderly lady who had been buried only days earlier was stripped of her clothes, her naked body dumped by the roadside.<sup>43</sup>

This was by no means an exceptional case. In his report to the commissar of the military division in Shaanxi where he worked, party member Hou Shixiang explained that when he returned to his village in Fengxian county, Hunan, he noticed that many of the coffins had been disinterred and had been left strewn about the field in front of his house. The lids were ajar, the remains gone. A few days later, on a rainy afternoon, he noticed a plume of smoke from the chimney of the local deputy secretary. Inside the house were four large cauldrons in which corpses were being simmered into fertiliser, the extract to be evenly distributed over the fields.<sup>44</sup>



## Nature

Travelling extensively through the Qing Empire in the 1870s, Baron von Richthofen reported that the entire north of the country was destitute of trees, the barren mountains and hills offering a desolate view.<sup>1</sup> Securing fuel for the long, cold winters was always a problem in imperial China. Farmers raised large quantities of maize and sorghum: seeds were used for food, while the stalks served as fuel to heat the kang, a hypocaust bed which the family slept on at night and sat on during the winter when it was heated by flues built inside.<sup>2</sup> In a country depleted of forests, lack of fuel was widely felt: the scarcity of wood meant that every chip, twig, root and shaving was eagerly gleaned by children or elderly women, who stripped the ground bare.

Forest destruction – for clearing, fuel and timber – was made worse after 1949 by rash interference in the natural environment. Mao viewed nature as an enemy to be overcome, an adversary to be brought to heel, an entity fundamentally separate from humans which should be reshaped and harnessed through mass mobilisation. War had to be waged against nature by people pitted against the environment in a ceaseless struggle for survival. A voluntarist philosophy held that human will and the boundless energy of the revolutionary masses could radically transform material conditions and overcome whatever difficulties were thrown in the path to a communist future. The physical world itself could be reshaped, hills erased, mountains levelled, rivers raised – bucket by bucket if necessary.<sup>3</sup> Launching the Great Leap Forward, Mao declared that ‘there is a new war: we should open fire on nature’.<sup>4</sup>

The Great Leap Forward decimated the forests. In the drive to increase steel output, the backyard furnaces that mushroomed everywhere had to be fed, farmers fanning out into the mountains to cut down trees for fuel. In Yizhang county, Hunan, the mountains were covered in lush primeval forest. A great cutting followed, some units felling two-thirds of the trees to feed the furnaces. By 1959 nothing but bare mountains remained.<sup>5</sup> In Anhua, to the west of Changsha, an entire forest was turned into a vast expanse of mud.<sup>6</sup> Being driven through thick ancestral forests along the road from Yunnan to Sichuan, Soviet specialists in forestry and soil preservation noted that trees had been randomly felled, resulting in landslides.<sup>7</sup> Forests were brutalised everywhere, sometimes beyond recovery.

But random logging did not stop with the end of the steel campaign. The famine was not just a matter of hunger, but rather of shortages of all essentials, fuel in particular. As farmers were desperate for firewood and timber, they reproduced habits acquired during the steel campaign, returning to the woods to cut and slash. Stealing was easier than ever before because lines of responsibility for forestry had become blurred with collectivisation: the forest belonged to the people.<sup>8</sup> In Wudu county, in arid Gansu, there had been some 760 people in charge of forestry before the Great Leap Forward; by 1962 about a hundred remained. The situation was the same all over China. In 1957 Jilin province was covered in dense forests and beautiful woodlands managed by 247 forestry stations. Only eight of these survived collectivisation.<sup>9</sup>

Not only were local brigades powerless to stop depredations of natural resources, but they were often complicit in them. When walking through the gates of Sihai commune in Yanqing county, up in the mountains just outside Beijing, a visitor in March 1961 was met with the sight of some 180,000 stumps of trees – linden and mulberry – cut an inch or two above the ground. This was the work of a mere two units.<sup>10</sup> Farmers were so desperate for warmth that they even cut down fruit trees in the middle of the winter. As the Forestry Bureau from Beijing reported, 50,000 apple, apricot and walnut trees were hacked down by one village in Changping, while a brigade used a tractor to uproot 890,000 plants and seedlings for fuel.<sup>11</sup> More often than not, communes would send teams to poach from neighbours: from Huairou a hundred farmers were dispatched across the county border to Yanqing, where they cut down 180,000 trees in less than three weeks.<sup>12</sup> Closer to the capital, trees along the railway were felled, 10,000 vanishing along the line in Daxing county.<sup>13</sup> Further south even telephone poles were taken down for fuel.<sup>14</sup> Far inland, in Gansu, a single brigade destroyed two-thirds of all 120,000 varnish trees, crippling the local economy, while another team managed to fell 40 per cent of the tea-oil trees on which local villages had depended for their livelihoods.<sup>15</sup>

People were desperate for kindling. Some villages burned not only their furniture but even some of their

houses after cutting down the trees: 'What is under the pot is more scarce even than what is in the pot,' farmers lamented.<sup>16</sup> Even in Panyu, Guangdong, surrounded by subtropical vegetation, two-thirds of all households had no fuel to start a fire, some even lacking a match. Fire had to be borrowed from neighbours. Once started, it was guarded like a precious commodity, as entire villages sank back into a primitive barter economy.<sup>17</sup>

In cities too trees were felled, but for different reasons. As we have seen, many companies used the Great Leap Forward to expand their facilities, often out of all proportion to their actual needs. One arm of the Commercial Bureau of Nanjing destroyed a fruit yard with 6,000 cherry, peach, pomegranate and pear trees. The cleared field remained empty. Such destruction was common in Nanjing. As an investigation at the end of 1958 showed, a few dozen units were responsible for illegally hacking down 75,000 trees. Most were factories in need of timber, but some sold the wood on the black market to raise much-needed income.<sup>18</sup>

Although there were periodic campaigns to turn the denuded countryside green – barren deserts would be transformed into lush forests – widespread famine, poor planning and a more general collapse of authority combined to defeat efforts at afforestation. Trees that had just been planted instantly disappeared. In 1959, for example, Beijing sent thousands of people to plant 2,600 hectares of protective greenery at the Ming Tombs Reservoir. The local commune destroyed more than half within a year. Outside Beijing between a third and four-fifths of all reforestation and seedling projects were lost. The damage in regions further removed from the seat of power must have been even greater.<sup>19</sup> In Heilongjiang, with its mountains clad in dense forest harbouring virgin larch, purple linden and Manchurian ash, one-third of all seedlings in new shelter forests died because they were poorly managed.<sup>20</sup> In Hubei, some 15,000 trees planted to stabilise the banks of a dam in E'cheng were illegally felled as soon as they were put in the ground. They were replanted, but the job was carried out so badly that most simply tilted over and dried out.<sup>21</sup>

To the many causes of denudation must be added fire, cases of which soared as a result of greater human activity in forests and a collapse in effective forestry management. Some 56,000 hectares were destroyed in thousands of fires in Hunan during the first two years of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>22</sup> In the arid northern plains of Shaanxi and Gansu, where forest was already rare, 2,400 fires claimed more than 15,000 hectares in the spring of 1962.<sup>23</sup> Fires could be accidental, but often the forest was burned on purpose to produce fertiliser or hunt down wildlife. As fire advanced and the forest receded, so the animals were slaughtered. Even rare species were fair game for hunters, and some of them – golden monkey, wild elephant and sable – were driven to the edge of extinction.<sup>24</sup>

Fire was also used to clear the land for cereal grain, although most of the reclamation took place in pastoral areas. Elsewhere the cultivated surface actually shrank since collectivisation was supposed to bring about such astonishing jumps in productivity that a third of all fields could be abandoned. In the Gansu corridor and the Ningxia plain, for instance, winter wheat intruded on the steppes, hastening desertification. The county of Yanchi – to take but one example from Ningxia – doubled its farmland to 50,000 hectares during the Great Leap Forward, cutting away the highland grasses and driving the sheep up the hills to graze: the county now faced the sand. Further to the west, in the arid Qaidam basin, a bleak expanse pockmarked by salt marshes and surrounded by mountains so cold that little could grow, communes destroyed 100,000 hectares of shrubbery and desert vegetation to make way for grain cultivation. The risk of being buried by drift sand then forced several collective farms to move.<sup>25</sup>

The extent of forest coverage lost during the famine is difficult to estimate.<sup>26</sup> Up to 70 per cent of the shelter forest was destroyed in some counties in Liaoning province. In east Henan, 80 per cent of all shelter forests vanished; in Kaifeng it had gone altogether, and some 27,000 hectares were given up to the desert.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the immense expanse of the north-west – from Xinjiang to Shanxi – a fifth of all trees were cut down.<sup>28</sup> In Hunan half of the forest was felled.<sup>29</sup> In Guangdong just under a third had disappeared.<sup>30</sup> Yu Xiguang, an expert on the famine, claims that 80 per cent of the forest coverage went up in smoke, although that may be an overestimate.<sup>31</sup> The damage varied from place to place, and even in the archives statistics are political artefacts rather than objective reflections of reality. What is certain is that never before had such a large diversity of forests, from the bamboo groves in the south to the alpine meadows and boreal stands of fir and pine in the north, suffered such a prolonged and intense attack.

After dark clouds filled the skies, thunder and rain exploded over Hebei in the early summer of 1959. As the torrential downpour continued unabated, the drainage system choked with mud, excrement and foliage,

irrigation canals caved in, streets turned into rivers and the region north of the capital flooded. The monsoon dissolved the houses made of mud and destroyed the fields, either waterlogging them or washing away the topsoil. Streets were coated with silt and heaped with wreckage. A third of all farmers in Tongzhou were affected, as homes collapsed, crops were lost and animals drowned.<sup>32</sup> Other catastrophes besieged China during the summer. Heavy rain lashed Guangdong. Typhoons pummelled the coast further north. Extreme variations in the weather had unforeseen consequences, causing the worst drought in Hubei in several decades.<sup>33</sup> Much was made of the impact of nature on the economy, as the leadership deflected attention away from politics by attributing economic setbacks to these calamities. The exact proportion of blame to be assigned to nature became a point of contention, and Liu Shaoqi would later get into trouble by openly claiming that only 30 per cent of 'difficulties in production' were caused by natural disasters, the remaining 70 per cent being due to man-made factors.

But Liu's explanation, while quite common, reproduced rather than challenged the notion which lay at the root of environmental degradation in China at the time, namely that humans were an entity separate from nature altogether.<sup>34</sup> Both were intertwined, as detailed studies carried out on 'natural calamities' at the time show. When an investigation team revisited Tongzhou the following summer, they found extreme destitution, as the state had all but abandoned the villagers, who barely survived without adequate food, clothing or shelter.<sup>35</sup> Traditional coping mechanisms in times of disaster – private charity, state assistance, mutual help, family savings and migration – had failed to take effect, and the flooding had a far more profound and prolonged effect as a result of collectivisation. But none of this explained why Tongzhou had been hit so badly. Did it rain more over that part of the region? The answer came a year later, after Liu Shaoqi pointed out the marginal role played by catastrophes in a speech attended by thousands of top cadres. In the more open political climate of 1962, the Water Conservancy Bureau started taking stock of how the Great Leap Forward had affected the irrigation system. It singled out Tongzhou for special attention. The conclusion was unambiguous: poorly conceived irrigation projects, hastily implemented during the water-conservancy movement of 1957–8, had disturbed a carefully balanced natural water system. Combined with a huge extension of agriculture, more water than ever before was forced to go underground. When the clouds burst over Tongzhou in 1959 the water had nowhere to go, inundating fields and villages.<sup>36</sup>

The same happened all over the country. In Hebei, the Cangzhou region was so devastated by a typhoon in July 1961 that a team of twenty-four men was immediately sent from the provincial party committee. They spent ten days in the region, where close to half of all the fields stood under water. The team quickly realised that the natural drainage system had been destroyed by irrigation work undertaken since the Great Leap Forward. Poorly designed reservoirs, canals and ditches contributed to the disaster, but increased cultivation made it worse, as big, square fields had replaced the small and uneven plots that traditionally followed the topography of the terrain. Even villages which had never suffered from inundation now stood waterlogged. Mud houses topped by heavy stone roofs caved in on their inhabitants. As the team noted, nature and people paid the price of past policies: everything was 'emaciated' (shou): 'people are emaciated, the earth is barren, animals are skinny and houses are thin'.<sup>37</sup>

Tongzhou and Cangzhou are two well-documented examples, but even greater belts of starvation ran along the Huai River and Yellow River plains: from Shangqiu in Henan to Jining in Shandong, from Fuyang in Anhui to Xuzhou in Jiangsu, Hu Yaobang spent a month travelling some 1,800 kilometres inspecting the devastation caused by heavy rain in September 1961. As we shall see, many of the sites of horror where the death rate was at least 10 per cent were located in those two areas. Some of these names – Fengyang, Fuyang, Jining – have since become symbols for mass starvation. The first thing Hu Yaobang observed was that the rainfall that autumn had hardly been exceptional. In some of the most devastated counties such as Fengyang 'the rainfall was basically normal'. Further enquiries revealed that the main reason these regions were devastated by inundations of no more than 700 millimetres was the extraordinary extent of water-conservancy projects carried out since the autumn of 1957. These vast irrigation networks trapped the water, then silted up and became 'an evil dragon turning the land into a sea'. So bad was the situation that any rainfall exceeding 300 millimetres could cause devastation. The local villagers deeply resented the canals and channels built over the past few years, seeing them as the main reason for the inundations. Hu noted that 'some of the cadres are honest and are learning the lesson, but others are confused, some even insisting that it is a natural catastrophe'.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the country the irrigation projects, built by hundreds of millions of farmers at great human and economic cost, were for the main part useless or downright dangerous. Many violated the laws of nature,

resulting in soil erosion, landslides and river siltation. We saw how in Hunan, a province blessed with fertile soil, river valleys and terraced fields, lush mountains covered with primeval forest were defaced by local communes during the steel drive. The denuded mountains were washed bare by torrents, since there was no longer a canopy to intercept rainwater. As the capacity of forests to retain water was degraded, natural hazards were amplified into disasters. Large irrigation projects that had disrupted the natural flow of water with stopbanks, culverts, reservoirs and irrigation channels only aggravated matters. Accumulated deposits heightened the bed of local rivers in Hunan by up to 80 centimetres, so that water threatened to spill over and flood the neighbouring villages.<sup>39</sup>

Local reclamation projects made things worse. Launched by the state and local communes in response to food shortages, they showed little sense of stewardship of nature. In Hunan over 100,000 hectares were opened up, much of it on steep mountain slopes. The rain then flushed the soil and took it to the newly built reservoirs, choking them with sediment. One team in Longhui reclaimed ten hectares on a gradient against the mountain: the runoff from torrential rain in May 1962 took enough soil to silt up thirty dams and five roads.<sup>40</sup>

Shortages of different goods also tended to reinforce each other in a vicious circle of want. Once all the fertiliser had been squandered in the Great Leap Forward of 1958, the fields turned barren. Paths between the rice paddies were poorly maintained, as farmers lost control over the land and crops were randomly planted and frequently changed. Close cropping and deep ploughing further stripped the farmland, as the soil was played out. In the past a field could retain carefully irrigated water for four to five days, but by 1962 the water seeped through the earth in less than seventy-two hours. This meant that twice as much water was needed, precisely as the system was silting up.<sup>41</sup> The Bureau for Water Conservancy and Hydroelectricity in Hunan concluded that some 57,000 square kilometres suffered from soil erosion, including most of the river basin of the Yangzi and between a quarter and a third of the Xiang, the Zijiang and the Yuanjiang – three of the four largest rivers in the province. Up to half of all devices for water and soil conservation had silted up and been washed away. In the wake of the irrigation campaign the amount of soil erosion had increased by 50 per cent.<sup>42</sup>

Shabby workmanship, carried out by starved farmers without much planning and often in disregard of expert opinion, also marred new irrigation projects. In Hunan, by the end of the famine, less than half of all pumps actually worked. Many were broken, others simply stopped working in the absence of any supervision.<sup>43</sup> In the Hengyang region, two-thirds of all medium-sized reservoirs and a third of all small dykes were dysfunctional, as water was lost through leaks and seepages.<sup>44</sup> In the province as a whole, a tenth of all medium reservoirs were described as completely wasted projects, and they were abandoned halfway through. None of the ten large ones had much of an impact, as they submerged large cultivated surfaces but actually irrigated very little, causing great anger among local people who had been forced to resettle.<sup>45</sup> In many cases the building material was so brittle that the movement of the waves inside the reservoirs created grooves of a depth of fifty to seventy centimetres inside the dam.<sup>46</sup> The use of dynamite by hungry farmers to fish near dams and sluices did not improve the situation.<sup>47</sup>

Hunan was no exception. In neighbouring Hubei, during the drought of 1959 which the party leadership identified as one of the catastrophes to have ravaged the country, water from the mighty Yangzi could not be diverted into the fields because more than three-quarters of all new sluices were too high. The river passed along arid fields, as people and cattle went thirsty.<sup>48</sup> Along the 100-kilometre stretch between Jianli and Jingzhou, in the midst of the drought, farmers dug holes into local dykes to irrigate the fields, but later these were flooded during heavy rains.<sup>49</sup> By 1961 an estimated 400,000 small reservoirs were in a state of disrepair; roughly one in three either collapsed, silted up or leaked dry.<sup>50</sup>

But as in other parts of a country in the grip of gigantism, large projects also mushroomed. In Hubei they swelled from a few dozen before 1957 to well over 500. Once these were completed they were often simply abandoned to local communes, many of which failed to provide any supervision whatsoever. Stones were carted away from embankments, aqueducts were left to silt up, holes were dug in retaining walls, and cowsheds, pigsties and even entire houses were built on top of dams. The rubber used to seal sluices hermetically was cut away, while the telecommunication equipment from unmanned sentry posts was stolen.<sup>51</sup> The conclusion was inescapable: despite the huge efforts devoted to irrigation schemes with the forced enlistment of millions of farmers throughout the province, by 1961 less than a million hectares were irrigated, in contrast to the 2 million in 1957.<sup>52</sup> The position in Hunan was only marginally better: after massive investment in water conservancy the overall irrigated surface in the province increased from 2.66 million hectares in 1957 to about 2.68 million in 1962, or less than 1 per cent.<sup>53</sup>



Dams throughout the country lacked spillways, used shoddy material and were built without regard for the local geology. Many collapsed. In Guangdong, the dam at Fenghuang, Chao'an county, burst in 1960, followed by another at Huangdan, Dongxing county. These were large reservoirs, but medium-sized and small ones also caved in, for instance in Lingshan, Huiyang and Raoping.<sup>54</sup> Nationwide, 115 large reservoirs, or 38 per cent of the total, were unable to hold back the floodwaters during the rainy season.<sup>55</sup> According to a report from the central leadership, three large, nine medium and 223 small dams or reservoirs collapsed in 1960 because they were badly built.<sup>56</sup>

While many of those erected with earth collapsed almost immediately, some were dangerous time bombs ticking away for decades. This happened with the Banqiao and Shimantan dams in Zhumadian, Henan, built as part of the 'Harness the Huai River' campaign in 1957–9, as we have seen in an earlier chapter. When a typhoon hit the region in August 1975, these dams broke, unleashing a tidal wave which drowned an estimated 230,000 people.<sup>57</sup> By 1980 some 2,976 dams had collapsed in Henan. As the chief of the provincial Bureau for Water Resources later put it, referring to the Great Leap Forward, 'the crap from that era has not yet been cleared up'.<sup>58</sup>

Interference with nature increased the alkalisation – also known as salinisation or sodification – of farmlands, although this was a phenomenon more commonly associated with the semi-arid plains of the north. Alkalisisation is often seen as a drawback of irrigation in dry regions where a lack of rainfall allows the soluble salts contained in water to accumulate in the soil, severely reducing its fertility. New irrigation schemes had a disastrous effect on the alkalisation of the North China Plain. In Henan, some two-thirds of a million hectares of soil turned into alkaline land.<sup>59</sup> In Beijing and the surrounding suburbs, as the Water Conservancy Bureau found out, the amount of soil lost to alkalisation had doubled to 10 per cent during the Great Leap Forward.<sup>60</sup> But along the coast, too, salinisation increased through the intrusion of marine water, a consequence of the half-baked schemes of local cadres courting the attention of their superiors. In a Hebei commune located twenty kilometres from the sea, tradition was brushed aside in the pursuit of a vision of symmetry, as grand canals were dug to criss-cross square paddy fields rebuilt from uneven plots that customarily hugged the contours of the land. The crop plummeted as the proportion of alkaline land doubled.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the province the amount of alkaline land jumped by 1.5 million hectares.<sup>62</sup>

Hebei was hardly exceptional: in his report on salinisation, Liu Jianxun noted that in many counties in northern Henan the extent of salinisation had doubled, reaching as high as 28 per cent.<sup>63</sup> Hu Yaobang, inspecting counties along the Yellow River, found that huge irrigation schemes in some counties in Shandong had increased the overall proportion of alkaline soil from 8 per cent to as much as 24 per cent.<sup>64</sup> This was confirmed in a more detailed report on the northern and western parts of the province, where on average salinisation was above 20 per cent by 1962, having doubled since the Great Leap Forward. In Huimin county it was close to half of all cultivated land. There was little doubt about the reasons for this: 'Over the last couple of years the development of irrigation schemes has disturbed the natural drainage system.'<sup>65</sup> How many millions of hectares were lost to salt during the great famine is not clear, but it is likely to have reached 10 to 15 per cent of all irrigated cropland.

No nationwide or even provincial figures exist, but qualitative evidence suggests that air and water pollution also contributed to an environmental crisis of considerable proportions. China had no treatment plants, and both urban sewage and industrial waste were discharged directly into local rivers. In the drive to transform a predominantly agricultural society into an industrial powerhouse capable of leading the socialist camp in its conquest of the world, the amount of pollutants such as phenol, cyanide, arsenic, fluorides, nitrates and sulphates released into water streams surged. Phenol is one of the most common contaminants: 0.001 milligrams per litre is advisable for drinking water and 0.01 for farming fish. In spillages in the Songhua and Mudan rivers, which flow through the bleak industrial heartland of the north, the amount of phenol ranged from two to twenty-four milligrams per litre. Where carp, catfish and sturgeon once teemed, nothing but a noisome flow of toxic materials remained. In a 150-kilometre stretch of the Nen River, a major tributary of the Songhua, some 600 tonnes of dead fish were removed by fishermen in less than a day in the spring of 1959. In Liaoning fish disappeared completely from the rivers near the industrial cities of Fushun and Shenyang. Along the coast

near Dalian, it was not unusual to harvest some 20 tonnes of sea cucumber each year, but the delicacy vanished during the Great Leap Forward.<sup>66</sup> Further south, in Beijing, the State Council complained about pollution: the powerful Anshan iron and steel complex discharged such large amounts of waste that the rivers reeked of petrol, with dead fish floating belly up on the slimy surface.<sup>67</sup>

So great was the amount of alkaline waste released by paper mills in Jiamusi that even the bottoms of boats corroded. The mills themselves were no longer able to produce high-quality paper because they relied on the river water they so heavily polluted. This was the case for all factories in the belt stretching from Shanghai down to Hangzhou. Oil companies were also culprits, a single plant in Maoming releasing 24,000 tonnes of kerosene into rivers each year. Other scarce resources in the midst of famine were emptied into the water: smelting plants in dirty, dusty Shenyang, the State Council calculated, could have saved 240 tonnes of copper and 590 tonnes of sulphuric acid a year – simply by recycling the water they used.<sup>68</sup>

Few comparative studies were made at the time to measure the increase of pollution after 1957, but one case study illustrates the impact of the Great Leap Forward. The leather, knitting, paper and chemical factories in Lanzhou, the industrial centre of the north-west, generated some 1,680 tonnes of waste water a day in 1957. This had rocketed up to 12,750 tonnes a day by 1959. Lanzhou is the first large city along the Yellow River, which contained eight times more pollutants than was allowed by the Ministry of Hygiene. The river slowly wound its way through the deserts and grasslands of Inner Mongolia before entering the North China Plain, where the water was diverted for irrigation through endless conduits and culverts, the pollutants becoming embedded deep in the cultivated soil.<sup>69</sup>

People too were poisoned, as rivers were often the only source of drinking water. Workers living near steel plants in the north suffered from chronic poisoning. In Zibo, Shandong, a hundred farmers became ill after drinking water polluted with contaminants from a pharmaceutical factory upstream.<sup>70</sup> In Nanjing, a single factory employing a mere 275 workers produced 80 to 90 tonnes of sewage containing radioactive material each day. No measures for waste disposal existed, and all of it was dumped straight down the drain, ending up in the Qinhuai River, which turned into a cesspool. Even groundwater was poisoned: used by local people to wash their rice, the water in the wells near the factory turned red or green.<sup>71</sup> In Baoshan, Shanghai, the waste water produced by steel plants leached into workers' dormitories. Outside, heaps of corrugated iron waste accumulated, so that workers had to climb over the rubbish to gain access to their sleeping quarters.<sup>72</sup> While slag was of less concern compared to pollution caused by waste discharges, a quarter of a million tonnes accumulated every day in busy Shanghai.<sup>73</sup>

The air too was polluted, although we have fewer specific examples since water was a far more precious resource than air and thus was monitored in greater detail. But one study shows that in Shanghai the equivalent of 20 tonnes of sulphuric acid mist, created in the production of phosphate fertilisers, was spewed into the air each day by a number of factories.<sup>74</sup>

Some of these factories also produced pesticides, which contaminated animals, people, soil and air. In Shanghai, for instance, thousands of tonnes of Dipterex and DDT were produced, as well as benzene hexachloride (BHC), a highly toxic farm chemical labelled 666 which degraded only slowly in the soil.<sup>75</sup> The effects of pesticides on livestock, agricultural land and aquatic products are well known, but in times of famine chemical poison found new applications, spreading far beyond the farm. Desperate for food, some communes used pesticides to catch fish, birds and animals. In Hubei, insecticides such as Systox and Demeton, commonly called 1605 and 1059 powders, as well as a hypertoxic pesticide known as 3911, were deliberately spread to capture ducks, which were then sold to the cities. In Shakou alone dozens of customers were poisoned and several died after eating the contaminated fowl. Famished farmers also foraged independently for food, releasing chemicals in ponds and lakes to kill the wildlife. In some places the water turned green, killing all.<sup>76</sup>

But the most popular form of pest control was mass mobilisation. Enthralled by the power of the masses to conquer nature, Mao had raised the call to eliminate rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows in 1958. Sparrows were targeted because they ate grain seeds, depriving the people of the fruits of their labour. In what is one of the most bizarre and ecologically damaging episodes of the Great Leap Forward, the country was mobilised in an all-out war against the birds. Banging on drums, clashing pots or beating gongs, a giant din was raised to keep the sparrows flying till they were so exhausted that they simply dropped from the sky. Eggs were broken and nestlings destroyed; the birds were also shot out of the air. Timing was of the essence, as the entire

country was made to march in lockstep in the battle against the enemy, making sure that the sparrows had nowhere to escape. In cities people took to the roofs, while in the countryside farmers dispersed to the hillsides and climbed trees in the forests, all at the same hour to ensure complete victory.

Soviet expert Mikhail Klochko witnessed the beginning of the campaign in Beijing. He was awakened in the early morning by the bloodcurdling screams of a woman running to and fro on the roof of a building next to his hotel. A drum started beating, as the woman frantically waved a large sheet tied to a bamboo pole. For three days the entire hotel was mobilised in the campaign to do away with sparrows, from bellboys and maids to the official interpreters. Children came out with slings, shooting at any kind of winged creature.<sup>77</sup>

Accidents happened as people fell from roofs, poles and ladders. In Nanjing, Li Haodong climbed on the roof of a school building to get at a sparrow's nest, only to lose his footing and tumble down three floors. Local cadre He Delin, furiously waving a sheet to scare the birds, tripped and fell from a rooftop, breaking his back. Guns were deployed to shoot at birds, also resulting in accidents. In Nanjing some 330 kilos of gunpowder were used in a mere two days, indicating the extent of the campaign. But the real victim was the environment, as guns were taken to any kind of feathered creature. The extent of damage was exacerbated by the indiscriminate use of farm poison: in Nanjing, bait killed wolves, rabbits, snakes, lambs, chicken, ducks, dogs and pigeons, some in large quantities.<sup>78</sup>

The main casualty was the humble sparrow. We do not have any reliable figures, as numbers were part of a campaign in which rhetorical inflation combined with specious precision to produce digits as surreal as the campaign itself. Shanghai thus triumphantly reported that it had eliminated 48,695.49 kilos of flies, 930,486 rats, 1213.05 kilos of cockroaches and 1,367,440 sparrows in one of their periodic wars against all pests (one wonders how many people secretly bred flies or cockroaches to obtain a medal of honour).<sup>79</sup> Sparrows were probably driven to near extinction, and few were seen for years afterwards. By April 1960, as the leaders realised that the birds also ate insects, they were removed from the list of harmful pests and bedbugs substituted instead.<sup>80</sup>

But the reversal came too late: insect infestations spread after 1958, ruining a significant proportion of the crop. The biggest damage was done before the harvest, as swarms of locusts would obscure the sky and cover the countryside under a bristling blanket, devouring the crop. Taking advantage of the drought in Hubei in the summer of 1961, they infested some 13,000 hectares in the Xiaogan region alone. In the Jingzhou region more than 50,000 hectares were devastated. Overall, in the province, some 15 per cent of the rice crop was lost to the voracious grasshopper. Everything was stripped bare, over half of all cotton being lost in the Yichang region.<sup>81</sup> Around Nanjing, where a ferocious campaign had been fought against sparrows, some 60 per cent of all fields suffered from insect damage in the autumn of 1960, which led to severe shortages of vegetables.<sup>82</sup> All sorts of harmful species thrived: in Zhejiang province 500,000 to 750,000 tonnes of grain, or roughly 10 per cent of the harvest, were lost in 1960 to snout moth, leafhopper, pink bollworm and red spider, among other pests. Preventive measures were hampered by lack of insecticide: farm chemicals had first been squandered in the assault on nature in 1958–9, and then shortages of all commodities extended by 1960 to pesticides, just as they were needed more than ever.<sup>83</sup>

In the war on nature, different factors thus combined to amplify dramatically what the leadership described as 'natural catastrophes'. The steel campaign caused deforestation, leading in turn to soil erosion and water loss. Grandiose irrigation schemes further disturbed the ecological balance, worsening the impact of inundations and droughts, both of which were drivers of locusts: drought eliminated all competition, while the heavy rains that followed allowed locusts to hatch more quickly than other insects and take over a mauled landscape. Because sparrows had vanished and pesticides had been misused, the insects descended unopposed on whatever meagre crop the farmers had managed to grow.

Mao lost his war against nature. The campaign backfired by breaking the delicate balance between humans and the environment, decimating human life as a result.



# Survival

## Feasting through Famine

Equality may have been a pillar of communist ideology, but all communist states built elaborate hierarchical orders on the ground. One reason for this was that most of these regimes lived in constant fear of real or imagined enemies, justifying the regimentation of society along military lines in which each subordinate unit was expected to carry out orders without questioning: 'each official is the anvil of his superiors and the hammer of his subordinates'.<sup>1</sup> Another reason was that the command economy distributed goods and services according to need rather than demand. And the needs of different groups were assigned different priorities by the party, whether the country was defending the realm against imperialist powers or busy building a communist future. In the People's Republic access to food, goods and services was largely determined by a household registration system – the rough equivalent of the internal passport instituted in December 1932 in the Soviet Union. Introduced to the cities in 1951, it was extended to the countryside in 1955 and became law in 1958, just when farmers were being pitchforked into communes. It divided people into two separate worlds by classing them either as 'city dwellers' (jumin) or as 'peasants' (nongmin).<sup>2</sup> The status conferred by the registration system was inherited through the mother, meaning that even if a village girl married a city dweller she and her children remained farmers.

The household registration system was a linchpin of the planned economy. As the state was in charge of the distribution of goods, it had to have a rough idea of the needs of different sectors of the economy. If large flows of people moved about the country in complete freedom it would upset the production quotas and distribution charts so meticulously mapped by central planners. But another function of the system was to tie the cultivators to the land, making sure that cheap labour was available in the collective farms from which a surplus was taken to pay for industrialisation. Farmers were treated as an hereditary caste deprived of the privileges given to city dwellers, which included subsidised housing, food rations and access to health, education and disability benefits. In the midst of famine the state left farmers to fend for themselves.

A wall was created between cities and the countryside, but an equally important fault line ran between ordinary people and party members. And within the party – as in the army – an elaborate internal hierarchy further determined the privileges to which one was entitled, from the amount of grain, sugar, cooking oil, meat, fowl, fish and fruit to the quality of durable goods, housing, health care and access to information. Even the quality of cigarettes varied according to rank. In Guangzhou in 1962 cadres of ranks 8 and 9 received two cartons of ordinary cigarettes a month, cadres of ranks 4 to 7 two better-quality cartons, while the highest three ranks, reserved for top intellectuals, artists, scientists and party leaders, received three cartons of the finest quality.<sup>3</sup>

At the apex of the party stood the leadership, who had special residences ensconced behind high walls, security guards round the clock and chauffeured cars. Special shops with scarce goods at discounted prices were reserved for them and their families. Dedicated farms produced high-quality vegetables, meat, chicken and eggs, which were analysed for freshness and tested for poison before being sampled by tasters. Only then was the food served to leaders in the capital and the provinces.<sup>4</sup> Above them was Mao, living in opulence near the Forbidden City where emperors had once dwelled, his bedroom the size of a ballroom. Sumptuous villas, staffed with chefs and attendants all year round, were at his beck and call in every province or major city.<sup>5</sup> At the bottom of the scale were the millions locked away in labour camps located in the harshest parts of the countryside, from the bitterly cold plains of Manchuria to the arid deserts of Gansu. They were made to break stones, dig for coal, carry bricks or plough the desert for years on end without any recourse to the law.

As the famine developed, the ranks of the privileged swelled. Despite continuous purges, the party membership increased by almost half, from 12.45 million in 1958 to 17.38 million in 1961.<sup>6</sup> Party members knew how to take good care of themselves. One way to feast through famine was to attend frequent meetings, where everything was provided for by the state. Some 50,000 officials came to Shanghai in 1958, a number which had doubled to

100,000 by 1960. They stayed in state-run hotels and dined at state-sponsored banquets. A favourite haunt was the Donghu Hotel, former residence of the famous gangster Du Yuesheng: it was one of the few venues not to charge for anything at all, whether elaborate menus or a range of perfumes on offer in the toilets. Some of these conferences lasted for over a month. In 1960 roughly one high-level conference was held every day of the year, at great cost to the city.<sup>7</sup>

Lower-ranking cadres feasted at local meetings. In Nayong county, in famine-ravaged Guizhou province, 260 cadres spent four days working through 210 kilos of beef, 500 kilos of pork, 680 chickens, 40 kilos of ham, 130 litres of wine and 79 cartons of cigarettes as well as mountains of sugar and pastries. To that had to be added fine blankets, luxury pillows, perfumed soap and other goods specifically purchased for the conference. In Beijing an automobile factory spent more than 6,000 yuan on eight visits to top-class hotels to entertain visitors towards the end of 1960.<sup>8</sup> Another ploy was to organise 'product testing' sessions. In Yingkou, Liaoning, over twenty cadres convened one morning in March 1960, systematically working their way through a range of local produce, starting with cigarettes and moving on to tinned meat, fruit and biscuits, all the while helping themselves to copious portions of rice wine. By the end of the day, satiated and drunk, three of the testers had vomited.<sup>9</sup>

Pleasure trips were organised. In February 1960, some 250 cadres boarded a luxury ship to cruise the Yangzi, sampling culinary delights on board while admiring limestone cliffs, karst landscapes and small gorges, occasionally leaving the comfort of their cabins to visit cultural highlights along the way. A hundred rolls of film were shot. The scent of perfumed oils and incense sticks, thoughtfully positioned throughout the vessel, wafted through the air. A steady stream of high-heeled waitresses in new uniforms served dish after dish of delicacies. A band played in the background. No expense was spared. For fuel and staff alone the twenty-five-day cruise cost some 36,000 yuan, to which had to be added 5 tonnes of meat and fish, not counting endless supplies of cigarettes and alcohol. It must have been a mesmerising sight, as the cruiser was illuminated like a rainbow with lights of every colour, dazzling in the darkness of a moonlit night. The sound of laughter, chatter and clinking of glasses travelled over the waters of the Yangzi, surrounded by a stunningly beautiful landscape blighted by mass starvation.<sup>10</sup>

During the famine the feasting and drinking (dachi dahe) that took place in party meetings in the cities and the countryside was a common source of complaint. Rapacious officials were often known as 'Piggy Cadres', after the character in the famous Ming-dynasty novel Journey to the West who was part human, part pig, and legendary for his laziness, gluttony and lust.<sup>11</sup> But outside the party some ordinary people too had opportunities to feast. In the collective canteens staff frequently abused their positions to pilfer the provisions. In one cotton factory in Zhengzhou, capital of famished Henan, those in charge regularly raided the storage room, using it as their personal larder. On one occasion a cook gobbled down twenty salt eggs in a single day, and others ate their way through kilos of tinned meat. Noodles and fried dough cakes were eaten at night, while meat, fish and vegetables earmarked for the canteen were divided up among the team in daytime. Ordinary workers had to survive on three bowls of rice gruel a day, occasionally supplemented by some dry rice or a steamed bun. Many were too weak to work.<sup>12</sup>

In the countryside villagers did not always stand idly by watching the pillaging. In one commune in Guangdong, where two-thirds of all pigs had been eaten by local cadres in banquets and feasts held to celebrate the advent of plenty, farmers warned: 'You cadres openly steal, we commune members secretly rob.'<sup>13</sup> An orgy of slaughter marked the countryside in 1958, when farmers killed off their poultry and livestock as a form of resistance against the people's communes. Spurred on by fear, rumour and example, they opted to eat the fruits of their labour, or store up a supply of meat, or sell their assets on the black market and save some cash, rather than hand over their belongings. Hu Yongming, as we have seen, systematically ate his way through his livestock in a village up in the hilly north-east of Guangdong province, slaughtering in close succession four chickens, three ducks, dogs and puppies as well as a cat. His family gorged themselves on the meat.<sup>14</sup>

But even after the heady days of 1958, villagers continued to find ways to have a treat occasionally – sometimes with the connivance of their local leaders. In Luoding, a county bloodied by a thuggish leadership, one brigade still managed to 'celebrate the birthday of the Communist Party', an excuse for each family to gulp down four ducks on 1 July 1959.<sup>15</sup> At Chinese New Year in 1961 thousands of farm cattle were slaughtered by

disgruntled farmers in the Zhanjiang region, a form of protest also observed in other parts of Guangdong province, as no pork was available for the all-important dumplings traditionally used to celebrate the new lunar year.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

Another reason for the occasional feast was that few people saw any reason to save, as expropriation and inflation rapidly eroded any personal reserves. Chen Liugu, a thrifty old lady living in Panyu, had managed to save 300 yuan but now splurged in the early summer of 1959, treating ten people at a restaurant where bowls of fish soup were avidly consumed. 'There is no use in saving money right now and I only have a hundred yuan left to buy a coffin.'<sup>[17](#)</sup> In Beijing, foreign residents noticed that some of the usually quiet restaurants did a roaring trade in 1959, as rumours about the advent of urban communes sent residents scrambling to sell their furniture in state-owned shops. The proceeds were spent on a rare meal in the restaurants.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

Sometimes ordinary people could eat copiously because they were lucky enough to be looked after by their cadres, who used every political skill to turn their unit into a bastion of abundance in the midst of starvation. In Xuhui, Shanghai, some canteens had the comparative luxuries of glass doors and fluorescent lamps fitted throughout. Others installed radios, while one canteen in Putuo built a basin with goldfish.<sup>[19](#)</sup> On the other hand poor supervision of the food-supply chain in some urban units occasionally meant that workers had plenty to eat. In Hebei an investigation showed that workers sometimes moved from one canteen to the next, eating their way through a series of meals. In one dining hall the tables were routinely laden with produce, which spilled over on to the floor. When the leftovers were swept up at the end of each session three to four washbasins, weighing five kilos each, were filled. In a further case of an embarrassment of riches, some workers took food back to their dormitories, although much of this was never eaten. The floor was covered in a layer of yellow mush, as people trod on the discarded buns.<sup>[20](#)</sup> In Shijingshan, just outside Beijing, the offerings were rich enough for workers to pick out the filling in jujube buns, discarding the dough.<sup>[21](#)</sup> In the canteens of the mighty Shanghai Machine Tool Factory, rice was given such a cursory wash that several kilos were dug out of the sewers on any one day of the week. This was used to feed the pigs. Slack supervision during the night shift allowed workers to eat their fill, and some even engaged in eating contests: a true champion could manage about two kilos of rice in one sitting.<sup>[22](#)</sup>

## Wheeling and Dealing

Whatever their position in the social hierarchy, virtually everybody, from top to bottom, subverted the system of distribution, covertly giving full scope to the very profit motive that the party tried to eliminate. As famine developed, the survival of an ordinary person came increasingly to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, slack, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state.

But no one could navigate the economy on his own. In a nation of gatekeepers, obstacles were everywhere, as anybody could obstruct anybody else, from the cantankerous caretaker in an apartment block to the dour ticket seller behind the window in a railway station. So prolific and complex were the rules and regulations that ran through the system that discretionary and potentially tyrannical power was vested even in the lowliest of bureau functionaries. The simplest of transactions – buying a ticket, exchanging a coupon, entering a building – could become a nightmare when faced with a stickler for rules. Petty power corrupted petty people, who proliferated at the lower levels of the planned economy, making arbitrary and capricious decisions over goods and services in short supply which they happened to control. And higher up the chain of command, the greater the power the more dangerous the abuse.

A network of personal contacts and social connections was required to get even the simplest things done. Asking a prominent friend to help was always easier than approaching an unknown official who might be devoted to the details of administrative procedure and see no reason to bestow a benefit on a stranger. Any connection was preferable to none, as a former neighbour, an erstwhile colleague, a school friend or even a friend of a friend was more likely to accommodate a request, turn a blind eye, skirt the law or bend a rule. In the higher reaches of power, influential colleagues could help one to secure state funds, avoid paying taxes or gain access to scarce resources. At every level people expanded their social network by trading favours, exchanging gifts and paying bribes. They looked after their own. Mu Xingwu, head of a storage unit in Shanghai, recruited nineteen relatives to work under him. Half the workforce were related: here was a solid basis for wheeling and dealing in the goods he was supposed to safeguard.<sup>1</sup> Everywhere people were pressurising those below them to protect and further their own interests. The planned economy, with its dedication to the greater good, spawned a system in which the individual and his personal network prevailed.

But people in the party were in a better position to use the system for their own personal benefit than those outside it. And they showed endless entrepreneurial guile in devising ways to defraud the state. A common practice for enterprises was to bypass the plan and trade directly between themselves. In Wuhan the Provincial Highway Transportation Bureau agreed to move goods for the Jiangnan District Number Two Commercial Office in exchange for food. The operation was worth well over a tonne of sugar, a tonne of alcohol and a thousand cartons of cigarettes as well as 350 kilos of canned meat in the first months of 1960. The Wuhan Oil Purchasing Station, on the other hand, traded hundreds of tonnes of oil, gas and coal to provision lavish banquets for its cadres.<sup>2</sup> In the north the Qinghe Forestry Bureau bartered hundreds of cubic metres of timber for biscuits and lemonade from a factory in Jiamusi. Others exchanged pigs for cement, or steel for timber.<sup>3</sup>

These practices permeated the entire country, as a parallel economy was created by travelling representatives sent to circumnavigate the rigid supply system. Purchasing agents built up social contacts, wining and dining local officials, and traded their way through a shopping list provided by the enterprise for which they were working. Bribes were common. The director of the Bureau for Goods and Materials in Shanghai regularly received presents, from deer antlers rich in velvet to white sugar, biscuits and lamb. More than 6 million yuan in goods were 'damaged' or 'lost' under his auspices in less than a year.<sup>4</sup> In Guangzhou, the Bureau for Transportation was accused of 'wasting' over 5 million yuan in the three years following the Great Leap Forward.<sup>5</sup> In Heilongjiang province alone one investigation estimated that some 2,000 cadres were shopping for timber on behalf of their units in late 1960, offering watches, cigarettes, soap or tinned food in return.<sup>6</sup> Dozens of factories in Guangdong sent agents on acquisition tours to Shanghai, cutting out the state from their business deals.<sup>7</sup> People's communes were no exception: the Seagull Farm in Guangdong sold some 27 tonnes of citronella oil to a Shanghai perfume factory rather than deliver it to the state.<sup>8</sup> Nobody knew how much trade

took place in this shadow economy, but one investigation team put the quantity of goods shipped out of Nanjing to other units without any official approval at 850 tonnes for the month of April 1959 alone. Hundreds of units were involved, some actually counterfeiting shipping permits, using false names, printing fake certificates and even shipping in the name of the army in order to make a profit.<sup>9</sup>

Barter exchange, sometimes considered a very primitive form of trade, became one of the most efficient ways of distributing goods where they were needed. And it could be a very sophisticated operation, moving along a nationwide network, cannibalising state structures, shadowing the planned economy and yet managing to remain invisible thanks to creative accounting. Goods became currency. In a detailed study of a famed dumpling shop in Shenyang, investigators showed that food was routinely exchanged for goods from more than thirty construction units in the city, ranging from iron pipes to cement and bricks. A steady and cheap supply of ingredients was also secured by exchanging the dumplings directly with state providers. The Municipal Aquatic Products Company, suffering as much as any other distributor from severe shortages in the midst of famine, handed over its entire supply of shrimps, normally earmarked for consumers in the suburbs, to the shop for the promise of dumplings. The cadres went on shopping sprees in the best department stores in Shenyang, paying with dumpling coupons. They took care of their employees, who feasted on the produce. The traffic police and the fire brigade were bought off, while even services such as delivery of coal, water supply, toilet cleaning and hygiene inspections were all carried out against an agreed amount of the shop's speciality.<sup>10</sup>

Creative accounting could hide misappropriation of funds. Accountants would invent expenditures which were never incurred, in some cases claiming funds of up to a million yuan. Another trick consisted of moving state investments away from industry towards fixed capital, as state units treated themselves to new buildings, dance halls, private toilets and elevators. This happened in the Zunyi region, where a raid revealed that 5 million yuan had been embezzled since the Great Leap Forward.<sup>11</sup> In Heilongjiang, one quarry entered all the capital expenditure on offices, canteens and even kindergartens into the production costs, thus passing on the bill to the state. In many other enterprises administrative and operating expenses were added on to the production costs. In Beijing alone some 700 administrative units, complete with salaries and expenses, thus vanished into a black hole called 'production'.<sup>12</sup> Other costs could be disguised and passed on to the state. In Luoyang, Henan province, a ball-bearing factory built a 1,250-cubic-metre swimming pool, sending the bill up as a 'heat lowering device'.<sup>13</sup>

Endless borrowing from state banks was also a common ploy. As Li Fuchun pointed out when he noted a deficit of 3 billion yuan in the summer of 1961, many units borrowed from the bank to feast.<sup>14</sup> And when a city or a county was in the red, it simply stopped paying taxes. This started in 1960, as a number of provinces passed regulations stipulating that all profits be kept. The Finance Department and the Trade Department of Liaoning province thus dictated that profits from enterprises under their control should be removed from the budget and distributed locally instead. In Shandong, Gaoyang county unilaterally determined that profits should fall outside the budget and be retained locally. Losses, on the other hand, were entered into the budget and billed to the state. Not only did collective enterprises and urban communes routinely fail to raise taxes, but entire cities decided to forgo tax collection.<sup>15</sup>

And then there were those who simply stole from the state, dispensing with clever accounting tricks altogether. Local factories along the Shanghai–Nanjing railway line pilfered, embezzled or smuggled well over 300 tonnes of steel, 600 tonnes of cement and 200 square metres of timber in less than a year. The New China Lock Factory from Xuzhou, for instance, hired a lorry systematically to steal all the material it needed from railway depots. Most of these activities were directed by top cadres. A large assembly hall in Nanjing East Station, entirely built from stolen material under the direction of station manager Du Chengliang, was a monument to organised theft.<sup>16</sup>

Another way to defraud the state was to inflate the ration roster. A macabre trade in dead souls flourished in the countryside. Just as families tried to hide a death in order to get an extra ration of food, cadres routinely inflated the number of farmers and appropriated the surplus. This was common too in cities, where the state was committed to feeding urban residents. When a team of investigators pored over the accounts of one county in Hebei, they discovered that the state handed out an average of nine kilos of grain a month in excess of the prescribed rations for each of the 26,000 workers. Everybody massaged the figures, one small brickyard being bold enough to declare more than 600 workers where only 306 could be found on the ground. Some factories



classified all their workers as involved in heavy duties because that entitled them to a larger ration, even if most of the employees were engaged in light work.<sup>17</sup> In the construction industry in Beijing, up to 5,000 workers who had died or had returned to the countryside were kept on the books. Even in the more rarefied atmosphere of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, well over a third of the 459 workers who claimed their daily allowance in the Institute of Geophysics were not regular members entitled to food rations.<sup>18</sup>

The obverse of this practice was to hire people outside the approved plan. A black market in labour appeared in which supply and demand determined the salary. Top workers and promising apprentices were lured away with fringe benefits or monetary incentives. Thousands, according to a report in the summer of 1960, had been hired away in Nanjing in the first half of the year.<sup>19</sup> Such was the competition that, when factory bosses refused to let good workers pursue better opportunities elsewhere, they would complain about lack of 'employment freedom' and try to get dismissed. A few exploded in a violent rage, directing their ire at the cadres who stood in their way. Of the 500 apprentices in the commercial sector of Baixia District, 180 had absconded. Part and parcel of the black market in labour were 'underground factories', which popped up in every city, including Nanjing. Some people took on night shifts on top of their regular jobs, others worked two shifts to make ends meet. This was the case for two-thirds of all workers in one construction unit near the centre. Students, doctors and even cadres abandoned their posts to make money on the black market, working on docks or moving goods on flatbed tricycles.<sup>20</sup>

One of the many paradoxes of the planned economy, therefore, was that everybody traded. People speculated by buying in bulk, betting on the fact that shortages and inflation would push the price up. An entire operation was run by Hubei University, with telegrams instructing agents to buy or sell specific commodities according to the fluctuating demands of the black market. A research centre at the Chinese Academy of Social Science in Shanghai employed twenty students from East China Normal University to buy goods which were traded for scarce commodities with other units.<sup>21</sup>

Party members were well placed to undertake speculative operations, some of them on a full-time basis. Li Ke, a cadre from the Jianguomen commune to the east of Beijing, wrote himself a certificate for sick leave for nine months and started trading in sewing machines, bicycles and radios, investing the profit in a bulk acquisition of electric bulbs and cables. These he sold in Tianjin, purchasing in turn furniture which he unloaded in the suburbs precisely when the market contracted: he thus acted in a commercially astute way, all the while being in the pay of the state. Many others did the same.<sup>22</sup>

But most cadres had bigger fish to fry, and petty trade was left to ordinary people. In Shanghai, a once freewheeling treaty port, trading habits died hard. Zhao Jianguo, a woman entrepreneur with little money, dealt mainly in small commodities such as light bulbs, but she also made a good profit on a prestigious Phoenix bicycle. Li Chuanying, also a petty trader, bought goods in Shanghai and sold them in Anhui province. Hu Yumei travelled to Huangyan, Zhejiang, to deal in straw hats, mats, dried fish and shrimps, often doubling her money. Ma Guiyou made about 100 yuan a month buying up jewellery and watches from wealthy families downtown and dealing in ration tickets in the countryside: 'I am not a counter-revolutionary! I don't steal and I don't rob, and I don't have a job, so who cares if I do a bit of business?' The officials who compiled the report with the help of neighbourhood committees in August 1961 were taken aback not only by the range of goods on offer, but also by the quality of information about market conditions. Despite all the economic information gathered by the machinery of the central planners, petty traders were more in touch with popular demand than the party. The phenomenon was widespread, drawing participants from all social backgrounds, ranging from old rickshaw puller Chen Zhangwu, who sold fruit from the countryside to make ends meet, to influential managers who used official trips to distant places such as Inner Mongolia and Manchuria as a cover for private deals.<sup>23</sup>

Factory workers also traded goods. The Federation of Trade Unions was alarmed by workers keen to pursue a 'capitalist lifestyle' by spurning the principles of the planned economy and speculating on scarce commodities, carefully comparing prices in different shops and buying for profit. Some would join a queue wherever they spotted one, regardless of what was being sold. A few brought family members along to take turns. Li Lanying, a female factory worker, spent five yuan on carrot jam, hoping to resell it at a later date. A colleague acquired persimmons by the sackload. These were not exceptions but rather 'a way of life', as the report put it, because workers widely believed that 'saving money is not as effective as saving goods'. Savings were eroded by several percentage points a month.<sup>24</sup> In Shanghai fear of want prompted people to queue up and hoard any and all



goods still available from the shops.<sup>25</sup>

When workers lacked the capital for speculation they resurrected a practice common before 1949, called dahui. Poor people would mutually borrow from a circle of trusted friends, each lending five to ten yuan a month to a different member every month, and each acting in turn as a banker about once a year. In the Dongcheng district in Beijing, some seventy such deals were struck every month among factory workers. Some splurged on luxury goods. Zhao Wenhua, a postal worker, treated herself to a watch, a bicycle, a fur coat and wedding gifts, all seen as durable objects that would keep their value. The practice spread on the understanding that, in times of dearth, goods were a safer bet than money.<sup>26</sup> Even children traded. Roughly one out of ten primary school children in Jilin speculated in cakes, meat, eggs, vegetables or soap.<sup>27</sup>

A few rolled the dice. In Lantang commune, Guangdong, two cadres gambled away a thousand kilos of grain belonging to the village, as well as several hundred kilos of vegetables. A few kilometres away a woman who lost fifty yuan gambling sold sex to meet her debts.<sup>28</sup> Gambling was an ingrained habit the authorities were unable to stamp out in Guangzhou, where factory workers played poker for food rather than for money. Some risked astronomical sums, up to 3,500 yuan.<sup>29</sup> In Liuhe, just outside Nanjing, gambling occurred almost everywhere, involving groups of up to twenty people.<sup>30</sup> Gambling was endemic during the famine, as people staked everything they had in sheer desperation. In the midst of the catastrophic winter of 1960–1, gambling was rife in Hunan too, with some players literally losing their trousers.<sup>31</sup>

As cash lost its purchasing power, ration coupons became a form of surrogate money. They were required for most essential goods, ranging from oil, grain, pork and cloth to thermos flasks, furniture and even building materials. Designed to ensure equitable distribution of basic commodities, they also tied the population into the household system, through which they were distributed. Each household was issued with a certificate or ration book on which all the family members were recorded, and this document in turn entitled the household to a monthly supply of ration coupons. Coupons were often valid for only one month. Their use was sometimes restricted to their place of issue, which could be a local canteen, a commune, a county, a city or occasionally an entire province. A rice coupon from one county had no validity in the next, forcing people to stay in their place of residence.<sup>32</sup>

Coupons were traded, just as goods were bartered. In some communes, for instance in Jinghai county, Hebei, coupons became a substitute for salaries, as money was all but phased out. A huge variety of coupons for goods and services from pumpkin seeds to haircuts was issued in lieu of payment, ranging in value from one fen to five yuan.<sup>33</sup>

One of the purposes of coupons was to preclude hoarding. But as the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress discovered in February 1961, over a third of all coupons, distributed since September 1959, had not been exchanged, meaning that paper worth some 20,000 tonnes of grain was circulating as surrogate money.<sup>34</sup>

Forging coupons, which were often hastily printed on poor-quality paper, was much easier than counterfeiting money. In the East China Hydraulic Institute a dozen forgeries circulated in the canteens.<sup>35</sup> The phenomenon must have been common. A police raid in Shantou brought to light some 200 separate cases involving pirated coupons. As a report to the provincial People's Congress indicated, more than a third of social infractions were related to ration coupons; the security forces even blamed 'enemy speculators' for releasing a flood of fakes in Qingyuan in the autumn of 1960.<sup>36</sup>

Where buyers and sellers met, a black market emerged. As trade moved from the shop on to the street, markets appeared on street corners, outside department stores, by railway stations, near the factory gates. The black market ebbed and flowed in a legal twilight zone, receding with each crackdown only to reappear as soon as the pressure abated. Sellers would furtively accost buyers and pull goods from paper bags or coat pockets, while others sat on kerbs, spreading out their wares on the ground, from foodstuffs and second-hand bric-a-brac to stolen goods. The public security services would conduct regular sweeps, chasing away the black-marketeers. But they kept returning. And when the local authorities turned a blind eye, makeshift bazaars emerged, with people gathering at an agreed time to barter goods, until the whole affair grew into a more permanent market with buyers and sellers flocking in from the neighbouring villages.

In Beijing black markets appeared in Tianqiao, Xizhimenwai and Dongzhimenwai, where hundreds of traders

offered goods that could fetch up to fifteen times the price fixed by the state. This did not deter an enthusiastic throng of housewives, workers and even cadres from shopping around. As bemused agents from the Public Security Bureau noted, people actually liked black markets.<sup>37</sup> They were tolerated but not allowed to flourish in the capital, unlike in Guangzhou, where buyers came from all over the region. In the southern city hundreds of buyers from Hunan province alone could be found specifically buying sweet potatoes in the summer of 1961, many of them having been sent directly by their home units.<sup>38</sup> Trade was openly conducted, and many of the sellers were children, including some who were only six or seven years old, and older ones who smoked and haggled with prospective buyers.<sup>39</sup>

In Tianjin local officials uncovered around 8,000 cases of black-market activity in the first weeks of January 1961. On some occasions more than 800 people were selling goods in one market alone, surrounded by thousands of customers examining the goods and generally blocking the traffic. 'There is nothing that the black market does not have,' according to one investigator.<sup>40</sup> The police who patrolled the streets were fighting a losing battle, and in July 1962 the authorities finally decided to legalise dozens of markets they had never quite managed to eradicate. By the end of the year half of the fruit and a quarter of all the pork sold in Tianjin came from more than 7,000 pedlars. They made almost double the money a state worker earned.<sup>41</sup> Thousands of people travelled to Tianjin from Beijing each day, such was the reputation of its market.<sup>42</sup>

As the famine gained ground and hunger gradually eroded the social fabric of everyday life, people turned inward. Everything was on sale. Nothing escaped the realm of trade, as bricks, clothes and fuel were bartered for food. In Hubei a third of the workers in big factories survived on loans. Some were so deeply in debt that they sold their blood to survive.<sup>43</sup> In a unit in Chongqing, Sichuan, one in twenty workers sold their blood. The percentage was even higher in Chengdu, as working men and women exchanged their blood for a morsel to feed their families. Construction worker Wang Yuting was known in all the hospitals, having sold several litres over a period of seven months.<sup>44</sup>

But the situation was infinitely worse in the countryside. From a single district in Huangpi, Hubei, 3,000 families took their spare clothes to sell in Wuchang, where they also begged for food.<sup>45</sup> In Cangxian county, Hebei, a third of villagers sold all their furniture, some even the roofs over their heads.<sup>46</sup> People bartered all they had in Changshou county, Sichuan, including the clothes from their backs.<sup>47</sup>

Before they died they sold their offspring, more often than not to couples who could not have children of their own. In Shandong, Yan Xizhi gave away his three daughters, and sold his five-year-old son for fifteen yuan to a man in a neighbouring village. His youngest son, a ten-month-old toddler, was sold to a cadre for a pittance. Wu Jingxi got five yuan for his nine-year-old son from a stranger, a sum which covered the cost of a bowl of rice and two kilos of peanuts. His heartbroken wife, an inquiry discovered, cried so much that her swollen eyes were losing their vision. Wang Weitong, mother of two, sold one of her sons for 1.5 yuan and four steamed dough buns. But many, of course, never found a buyer for their children.<sup>48</sup>

## On the Sly

Under the cloak of collectivisation, backed up by the naked power of the militia, party officials proceeded to strip people of every conceivable possession – in particular in the countryside, where farmers were more often than not defenceless in the face of rapacious cadres. It was a war of attrition waged against the people, as every new wave of plunder nipped in the bud even a faint hope of actually owning something private. In Xiangtan, Hunan, local people remembered six 'winds of communism' blowing over the villages. The first came in the winter of 1957–8, as money, china, silver and other valuable objects had to be handed over for 'capital accumulation'. The second took place in the summer of 1958 with the advent of the communes. A third 'wind' blew away pots, pans and iron utensils as the steel campaign gripped the county. Then, in March 1959, all savings in state banks were frozen. By the autumn of that year large irrigation projects were launched again, and tools and timber were commandeered. Finally, in the spring of 1960, a project for a giant pigsty was hatched by a local leader, who seized pigs and building materials.<sup>1</sup>

Most people had little recourse against open pillage. But they were not passive victims, and many devised a whole range of strategies of survival. The most common one was to slack at work, allowing natural inertia to take over. Loudspeakers might be blaring exhortations to work, propaganda posters might extol the model worker who overfulfilled the plan, but apathy more often than not governed the factory floor. In a typical workshop of forty workers in Beijing, half a dozen would habitually crouch around the stove to warm up in winter, while others would leave the factory in daytime to queue for goods or watch a movie. Cadres simply did not have the means to control every worker and punish every disciplinary breach.<sup>2</sup> A more comprehensive study by the Propaganda Department showed that in Shanghai up to half of all workers failed to pay much heed to work discipline. Some would arrive several hours late, others spent time chatting with each other. A few loafers failed to do any work at all, simply waiting for the next meal. Many disappeared well before the end of the day.<sup>3</sup>

The deeper the country sank into famine, the greater the shirking became. By 1961 each worker in Shanghai was contributing 40 per cent less value than in 1959, as more workers managed to produce fewer goods. Slacking, of course, was only one of several reasons why productivity plummeted, as we have seen in Chapter 18, but by 1961 factory workers had become masters of time theft.<sup>4</sup>

In the countryside, by 1959, many villagers had to work all day without eating. Apathy at work, besides being a result of malnutrition, was essential for survival, as every bit of energy had to be saved to get through the day. Farmers would till the fields under the watchful eye of a passing cadre, but as soon as he was out of sight they would drop their tools and sit by the road, waiting for the end of their shift. In parts of the countryside people slept all afternoon, placing their own sentries at key intersections along the fields.<sup>5</sup> Where cadres were lenient, up to half the local population managed to avoid work.<sup>6</sup> In some villages under a tolerant leadership, entire families would huddle together and sleep for days on end, literally hibernating through the winter months.<sup>7</sup>

Some historians have interpreted black-marketeering, obstruction, slacking and theft as acts of 'resistance', or 'weapons of the weak' pitting 'peasants' against 'the state'. But these survival techniques pervaded the social spectrum, so much so that if these were acts of 'resistance' the party would already have collapsed. In the conditions of starvation created by the regime, many people had little choice but to ignore customary moral standards and steal as much as they could.

Theft was endemic, its frequency determined by need and opportunity. Transportation workers were in the best position to pilfer state property, as millions of tons of goods passed through their hands. In the Wuhan Harbour Number Six Dock over 280 of the 1,200 employees systematically stripped freight trains while pretending to carry out maintenance and repair work.<sup>8</sup> In Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, half of the 864 porters at the railway station stole goods.<sup>9</sup> Mail theft was common, and was often organised by party members. In the Guangzhou Post Office a team of four was responsible for opening more than 10,000 overseas parcels, taking

watches, pens, ginseng, milk powder, dried abalone and other gifts. Many of the stolen wares were then sold at auction to postal workers. The entire leadership at the post office, or more than a hundred cadres, had a hand in the operation.<sup>10</sup>

Students stole from the canteen, fifty cases a month being brought to light in Nanjing University in 1960.<sup>11</sup> In Hushu Middle School in Jiangning county, just outside Nanjing, petty theft was the norm among students, a way of life that started with a simple carrot pilfered from the kitchen.<sup>12</sup> In state shops and department stores clerks at the counter subtly doctored receipts or even produced counterfeits, while in the back assistants rummaged through the storage rooms. Xu Jishu, a sales assistant at the Friendship Store in Shanghai, tampered with receipts, adding small sums of money that amounted, over time, to around 300 yuan. Li Shandi, employed in a pharmacy, confessed to putting away one yuan each day over several years, almost doubling her salary.<sup>13</sup>

Opportunity was greatest in the city, but need ruled the countryside, where many farmers had to survive famine by living on their wits. At every stage of the production cycle, villagers tried to keep back some of the grain from the demands of the state. This started in the field, even before the wheat or maize was fully ripened. Harking back to a traditional practice called *chiqing*, or 'eating green', villagers quietly clipped off spikes of grain straight from the field, husked and ground it in their hands and ate the raw, green kernels when out of sight of the militia. Eating the crop before it reached maturity was more common in the north, as it was easier to hide among dense rows of maize or in a field thick with wheat than in a rice paddy. Maize was also a more durable crop, standing in the fields for a longer period of time, and thus allowing for a greater number of thefts to take place.<sup>14</sup>

The autumn harvest in 1960 almost vanished in some communes as a result of crop eating. In Guangrao, Shandong province, several brigades took up to 80 per cent of the maize before it ripened, while crops of millet and green beans vanished altogether. In Jiaoxian county, also in Shandong, up to 90 per cent of all grains disappeared. Thousands of similar incidents rocked the province, as many of those discovered eating from the fields were beaten to death by the local militia.<sup>15</sup> In Xuancheng, Anhui, entire fields were eaten clean, as if a swarm of locusts had passed over them.<sup>16</sup> Recollecting the years of hunger, farmer Zeng Mu captured the importance of theft: 'Those who could not steal died. Those who managed to steal some food did not die.'<sup>17</sup>

Once the grain had been threshed and bagged, it was bulked up with water and sold to the state – with or without the complicity of local inspectors. As we have already seen, in Guangdong alone almost a third of 1.5 million tonnes of state grain suffered from a high water content, although poor storage conditions no doubt contributed to the rot in the subtropical south.<sup>18</sup> Once sold to the state, grain on the move was exposed to a plethora of thieving hands. In Xinxing county, Guangdong, close to 900 incidents of theft were reported in 1960. Lin Si, a boatman from Xinhe, took about half a tonne of grain on dozens of occasions. Others were more prudent, replacing stolen foodstuffs with sand and stones. In Guangzhou shippers would extract the grain with a bamboo tube and pour sand back into the bags.<sup>19</sup> In Gaoyao, Jiangsu, just about every boatman helped himself to the grain, each taking an average of 300 kilos a year.<sup>20</sup>

Guards in charge of state granaries stole. In Zhangjiakou, bordering Hebei and Inner Mongolia, a fifth of all watchmen were dishonest, sometimes stealing with the complicity of party members. Half of all cadres in charge of collection points in Qiuxian county were corrupt.<sup>21</sup> In the end, with the grain passing through so many grasping hands, one wonders how much actually reached the canteen table. In Suzhou local investigators estimated that out of a kilo of rice only about half made it to its final destination. It was pilfered from the granaries, taken during transportation, pocketed by accountants, confiscated by cadres and finally filched by cooks before a bowl of rice was ever served in a canteen.<sup>22</sup>

When local cadres colluded with the farmers, powerful forms of collective theft, subterfuge and deception could emerge, shielding the village from the worst effects of the famine. Some cadres kept two sets of books, one with the real figures in the village and another with fake numbers for the eyes of grain inspectors. This was widespread in several counties in Guangdong province.<sup>23</sup> In Xuan'en county, Hubei, one in three bookkeepers falsified the accounts. In Chongyang county, one party secretary took the initiative by declaring some 250 tonnes to the commune higher up but pencilling 315 tonnes into the local account book.<sup>24</sup> In June 1959 the office of the Hebei provincial committee concluded from a discrepancy between the amount of grain actually stored and the official inventory that 160,000 tonnes were missing, much of it as a consequence of false reporting and creative accounting.<sup>25</sup>

Then the grain had to be hidden, which was no easy task in the midst of ferocious and often bloody campaigns to take it from the farmers. In Xiaogan, Hubei, one of the largest stashes discovered by inspection teams



contained some 60 tonnes of grain. In Yitang commune, 110 tonnes were hidden behind false walls, inside coffins or in wardrobes. A search in Wuluo among fifteen households yielded 26 tonnes. In some cases local leaders distributed the grain immediately after the harvest and urged farmers to eat as much as they could before the militia could strike.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the country there were cases of local leaders quietly distributing grain to the farmers, helping many to survive the famine. In Yixian county, Hebei, 150 to 200 kilos of harvested grain per hectare were handed out in one commune. Elsewhere inspection teams commonly found 'black granaries'. In Jiaohe county, virtually every team had 'underground grain' of around 750 kilos.<sup>27</sup> Near Tianjin, the leader of Sunshi commune put it in simple terms when he withheld 200 tonnes of seed: 'the state's grain is also the people's grain, and what belongs to the people also belongs to the state'.<sup>28</sup> In Hunan some twenty-three counties were discovered to have 5 to 10 per cent of grain above what had been declared, totalling 36,000 tonnes. One of the most extreme cases was Liuyang, where 7,500 tonnes turned up after a painstaking check of 30,000 granaries.<sup>29</sup> But all too often the reverse was true. In many villages local leaders preferred to lower the grain consumption rather than ask for help higher up the chain of command, as they feared being seen as slackers who would beg rather than work towards a higher crop.<sup>30</sup>

Another stratagem used by local cadres was to 'borrow' grain from state granaries. In Hebei some 357,000 tonnes were thus 'borrowed' up to April 1959, often under pressure from highly placed party members. Party secretary Li Jianzhong from Sungu commune, near Tianjin, thus phoned the granary for a 'loan', which the employees flatly refused, only to be visited by the local boss who exerted the power of his position: 'When you are asked for a loan you should lend; even when you are not asked for a loan you should lend. From now on if there is a problem I will come and sort it out.' A loan of 35 tonnes was agreed on the spot. Units and institutions in cities too were keen to borrow without ever paying back. One middle school borrowed grain to feed its students, incurring a debt of 35,000 yuan.<sup>31</sup>

But in the end, when the food ran out, people turned on each other, stealing from other villagers, neighbours or even relatives. In Nanjing half of all conflicts between neighbours involved food, as people stole from each other, some of the incidents leading to fist fights.<sup>32</sup> Children and the elderly suffered most, for instance when a blind grandmother was robbed of the little rice she had been able to buy with relief coupons in Danyang city.<sup>33</sup> In the countryside, fierce competition for survival gradually eroded any sense of social cohesion. In Liaojia village, just outside Changsha, larceny was so bad that desperate cadres could do nothing but tell the farmers to steal from other villages instead, for which they would not be punished.<sup>34</sup> And once community bonds in the countryside unravelled, the family became an arena for strife, jealousy and conflict. One woman remembered how her mother-in-law slept with food coupons in a pouch tied around her neck. A nephew cut the string and stole the coupons one cold winter night, exchanging the lot for sweets. The woman died several days later.<sup>35</sup>

Communes, villages, families: all were seething with tension and resentment, as famine increasingly pitted erstwhile neighbours, friends and relatives against each other. As one party official noted in Hubei during the distribution of the summer crop, 'between the state and collectives, between brigades, between individuals, up, down, left, right and centre: at all levels there are disputes'.<sup>36</sup> Violence flared, fights over the crop tearing apart units or teams. Sticks and knives were produced as villagers confronted each other in fights over food.<sup>37</sup> In Yingshan county, Hubei, two poor men were hung from a tree after they were found stealing millet.<sup>38</sup>

In times of famine one person's gain was another's loss. Even when it seemed that petty theft took place against a faceless state, somebody down the chain of distribution paid the price. In Xuanwei county, Yunnan, a number of village leaders pumped up the figures when making grain deliveries in December 1958. The grain was earmarked to feed 80,000 railway workers. The plan on paper had pencilled in enough calories for each worker, but it failed to predict that the amounts delivered by the neighbouring villages were below the planned requirements. The railway workers – ordinary farmers conscripted from the countryside – went hungry for several days, and some seventy died of hunger before the end of the month.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the countryside, radical collectivisation created conditions of extreme shortage in which one person's survival depended on another person's starvation. In the end, through a combination of destructive policies initiated from above and covert forms of self-help pursued from below, the country imploded. But while self-defence and self-destruction in the famished countryside were often hard to disentangle, it was the weak, vulnerable and poor who suffered the most.

## 'Dear Chairman Mao'

Truth had met its end in Lushan. Although speaking out is never advisable in a one-party state, the clash among leaders in the summer of 1959 left nobody in any doubt about the danger of offering an opinion that diverged from the party line. And as Mao was often cryptic in his pronouncements, it was prudent to veer to the left rather than stray to the right. In the midst of mass starvation nobody actually mentioned famine, as leaders used euphemisms such as 'natural disasters' or 'temporary difficulties'. Lower down the ladder famine was such a taboo that local cadres went to great lengths to hide the starving and the sick from the prying eyes of inspection teams. When the party committee of Longhua county, Hebei, sent a group of officials to investigate the countryside, some villages herded the sick together and hid them in the mountains.<sup>1</sup>

A string of foreign visitors – carefully screened by the party and given a lavish tour of model communes – were all too willing to jump to the defence of Maoism.<sup>2</sup> François Mitterrand, a left-wing politician who later became president of France, felt privileged to report the Chairman's words of wisdom to the West. In his opulent villa in Hangzhou, Mao, 'a great scholar known in the entire world for the diversity of his genius', told him in 1961 that there was no famine, but only 'a period of scarcity'.<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the political spectrum, the Englishman John Temple, Conservative MP for Chester, toured the country in late 1960 and declared that communism worked and the country was making 'great progress'.<sup>4</sup>

But not everybody was so willing to be duped. Foreign students with a Chinese background were far less gullible. The majority of the 1,500 foreign students in Nanjing – most from Indonesia, others from Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam – expressed doubts about the Great Leap Forward, openly wondering about the viability of the communes and questioning the whole idea of collectivisation. As early as March 1959 quite a few were acutely aware of the effects of hunger on the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

Some foreign students were less inhibited than their local counterparts, but critical views were widespread in schools around the country – despite repeated campaigns against 'rightist conservatism'. As an investigation team dispatched by the Communist Youth League found, misgivings about the Great Leap Forward, the communist party and socialism in general were common. University students openly asked why, if the people's communes were such a superior form of organisation, food was short and peasants were abandoning their villages. Why was the supply of goods so poor in a socialist system? Why was the standard of living so low if the rate of development was higher than in capitalist countries? 'Indonesia may be a colony but people there live a good life,' one student opined.<sup>6</sup>

In the cities talk about the famine was muffled by the roar of propaganda, but was clearly audible to the many agents of the party. As informers working for a street committee noted in the Putuo district of Shanghai, ordinary factory workers like Chen Ruhang speculated openly about the number of deaths caused by the famine. Mass starvation was the main topic of conversation in his household, with visitors coming from the famished countryside in 1961.<sup>7</sup> In Hubei – as the Federation of Trade Unions discovered – half of all workers were talking critically about the famine by the end of 1961. Some openly defied their leaders. In one case, a man who was reprimanded for shirking work patted his stomach, then looked the cadre right in the eye and said 'It's empty!'<sup>8</sup>

In the south, closer to Hong Kong and Macau, talk about the free world beckoning just across the border was common by 1962. In Zhongshan county young people tilling the fields swapped stories about the crown colony, and hundreds actually attempted to make the passage each year. Many were arrested and sent back to their villages, where they regaled their friends with tales from their odyssey.<sup>9</sup> In Guangzhou young workers openly admired Hong Kong, allowing flights of fancy to take them to a mythical place where the food was bountiful and the work was easy.<sup>10</sup> 'Hong Kong is a good world!' somebody scribbled on the wall of a primary school.<sup>11</sup>

Other scribblers appeared determined to leave behind more permanent traces of their discontent. Messages of opposition were scrawled on toilet walls. In Xingning city one angry hand etched a slogan in a public toilet insulting Mao.<sup>12</sup> A lengthy diatribe against the export of food was found on the wall of a toilet in the Nanjing Automobile Factory.<sup>13</sup>

More daring were those who came out at night to post flyers and posters critical of the party. In Shanghai

somebody left a two-metre poster inciting rebellion.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes hundreds of leaflets were involved. In Gaoyang a hundred flyers with handwritten slogans on pink or red paper appeared overnight, prominently posted on walls or pinned on trees around the city: 'Why are the people of our country starving? Because all the grain is being shipped to the Soviet Union!' Another sounded a warning: 'The harvest is coming up soon and we must organise a movement to steal the wheat: he who wishes to join in, please be prepared!'<sup>15</sup> In Lanzhou over 2,700 flyers advocated a general strike in May 1962.<sup>16</sup> In Hainan, the large island off the coast of Guangdong, some 40,000 anti-party leaflets were reportedly distributed, some apparently dropped from planes sent by Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>17</sup> The extent of these subversive activities is difficult to gauge, as traces of opposition must have been erased as soon as they were spotted. But in Nanjing, in a mere three months, some forty separate slogans and flyers about the famine were reported by the police.<sup>18</sup>

Farmers too used posters to seek redress, vent their anger or denounce a cadre. In Ningjin county, Hebei, Zhang Xirong was brave enough to post a long wall-essay, called a *dazibao*, in protest over the conditions of his local canteen. He immediately attracted the attention of the local Public Security Bureau and was dragged away. His plea, in any event, was a lonely one, lost in a sea of 1.7 million flyers, posters and slogans the county deployed in its campaign to heighten public security.<sup>19</sup> Just as stubborn was farmer Wang Yutang. His response to an anti-rightist campaign, with its millions of official propaganda posters and ceaseless radio broadcasts, was to post his own *dazibao* in Shishou county. 'The Great Leap Forward in 1958 was all bragging, workers suffer greatly and our stomachs go hungry,' it boldly proclaimed.<sup>20</sup> But even if the balance of power was heavily tilted towards the party, which used a sea of propaganda to drown out the slightest grumbling of discontent, posters could sometimes achieve their goal. In Dazhu county, Sichuan, villagers effectively turned some of the propaganda weapons of the party against a local leader, denouncing him in more than twenty posters for embezzling six yuan. The public humiliation was such that the man refused to oversee the harvest and went fishing instead. Farmers immediately took possession of the crop.<sup>21</sup>

But more popular were verses. Just as Mao had demanded that everyone be a soldier, he proclaimed every man and woman a poet. The population was forced to produce millions of verses in the autumn of 1958, as festivals were organised and prizes handed out for the best folksongs that rhapsodised bumper harvests, steel plants or water-conservancy measures. A frenzied vision of a socialist future was conjured up in rhymed quatrains churned out by the million. In Shanghai alone it was claimed that a mere 200,000 workers had composed some 5 million poems.<sup>22</sup> While much of the officially sponsored poetry was rather trite, a truly creative spirit did appear in some of the ditties spontaneously created by villagers in response to collectivisation. Here, in the midst of famine, was a playful sense of humour that helped people get through times of misery. In Shanghai a popular saying was 'All is well under Chairman Mao, a shame no one can eat his fill.'<sup>23</sup> In Jiangmen county, Guangdong, farmers sang the following song:

Collectivisation, collectivisation,  
Nobody earns, somebody spends,  
Members earn but teams spend,  
Teams earn but brigades spend,  
Brigades earn but communes spend,  
Only fools become party activists!<sup>24</sup>

An illiterate villager came up with a poem to describe the thin gruel served in the canteen:

We enter the canteen,  
We see a big pot of gruel,  
Waves swell on each side of the pot,  
In the middle people drown.<sup>25</sup>

Local cadres were given satirical nicknames that mocked their greed, bad temper or gluttony. In Kaiping county, Guangdong, farmers referred to one particularly rotund cadre as 'Cooked Food Dog' (*yanhuogou*). 'Golden Fly' and 'Chopping Block Aunt' were also used. Elsewhere, 'Big Belly' was common, while every commune seemed to have a demon from the ghostly underworld. Many a cadre was called 'King Yan', the King of Hell.<sup>26</sup> Irony was not uncommon. In Sichuan – where, as we have seen, provincial leader Li Jingquan noted how people became even more corpulent than Mao Zedong thanks to the bounty brought about by collectivisation – some of the villagers mocked the canteens, saying that 'the advantage of the mess hall is that we are all much fatter',



referring to the swelling of bodies in famine oedema.<sup>27</sup>

Just beneath the surface of official propaganda lay a shadow world of rumours. They turned the world upside down, offering an alternative, dissident form of truth which subverted the censored information emanating from the state.<sup>28</sup> Everybody listened to rumours, trying to make sense of the wider world and waiting for an end to the folly of collectivisation. Rumours questioned the legitimacy of the party and discredited the people's communes. In Wuhan it was feared that even wives might be shared.<sup>29</sup>

Rumours encouraged acts of opposition to the state. Informal news about farmers who took possession of their land or grabbed grain from state granaries were common. In Chaoyang, Guangdong, one prophetic woman proclaimed that taking food in times of hunger would be condoned by the party.<sup>30</sup> In Songzi, Hubei, some seven brigades decided in the winter of 1959–60 to dissolve the collectives and divide up the land.<sup>31</sup> Rumours about land distribution also ran rampant in Anlu, Chongyang and Tongshan.<sup>32</sup> 'Mao has died, the land will be returned to the people!' was the message relayed by villagers in the midst of famine in Jiang'an, Sichuan.<sup>33</sup>

Deafening noise about shortages also contributed to a state of permanent chaos on the ground which, in turn, prompted the propaganda machine to churn out even louder slogans. People and party were locked in a war of words, as every dogma found its obverse in rumour. Panics, for instance, were triggered when ration coupons for certain goods were said to be phased out. Some workers in the Angang Steel Works bought up to thirty-five pairs of socks in June 1960 as long queues spontaneously appeared out of nowhere to stockpile all cotton goods.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in a commune in Changle, Guangdong, a rumour that salt might be withdrawn led to local panic in January 1961, with people struggling to hoard some 35 tonnes of salt in five days, forty times more than usual.<sup>35</sup>

Rumours of war and impending invasion engulfed entire communities, spreading fear by turning the party propaganda upside down. And fear, in turn, promoted a sense of cohesion, as apocalyptic imagery united a disgruntled countryside. In Guangdong farmers heard that Guangzhou was up in arms and Shantou had been taken, as Chiang Kai-shek had invaded the country. Banners wishing the Guomindang a long life appeared by the roadside. The information was precise: 'The Guomindang has reached Dongxi Village on the 14th!' or 'Chiang Kai-shek will come back in August!'<sup>36</sup> Defying common assumptions about the parochial lives that peasants allegedly lived in isolated villages, these rumours spread like wildfire, leaping from county to county and across provinces, reaching Hunan in a matter of days.<sup>37</sup> In Putian, Fujian, the province opposite Taiwan, a secret society distributed yellow banners to be prominently displayed after the fall of the communist party. Apparently the banners also protected against the effects of nuclear radiation.<sup>38</sup>

Some wronged villagers were confident enough to appeal to the law. In Liuhe, near Nanjing, a cadre snatched and later ate the chicken an old woman was trying to sell. Incensed, she went straight to court and lodged a complaint.<sup>39</sup> But more often than not litigation was meaningless, all the more so since the judicial system had crumbled under political pressure – even leading to the abolition of the Ministry of Justice in 1959. Politics was in command, curtailing formal justice – as well as formal recourse. In Ningjin county, for instance, the number of cadres in charge of the police, the inspectorate and the courts was halved in 1958. The local courts were overwhelmed with civil cases brought by ordinary people.<sup>40</sup>

In response, many turned instead to a tradition of complaint in the form of letters and petitions. As misinformation proliferated within the party bureaucracy, every level feeding false reports and inflated statistics to the next one up, the state security tried to bypass official organs and reach straight down to street level. It paid close attention to popular opinion and encouraged anonymous letters of denunciation.<sup>41</sup> Class enemies, after all, could worm their way into the ranks of the party, while spies and saboteurs were lurking among the masses. Popular vigilance was necessary to ferret them out: the people monitored the party. Even the most insignificant nobody had the power to put pen to paper and bring down a mighty cadre, a negligent local official or an abusive bureaucrat. Arbitrary denunciation could strike at any time up the ladder of power. And people wrote furiously, sending bags of letters each month to beg, protest, denounce or complain, sometimes coyly and humbly, occasionally vociferously. Some denounced their neighbours over a trifle, others merely sought help in changing jobs or moving house, and a few went into a long tirade against the entire system, peppering their letters with anti-communist slogans. They wrote to newspapers, the police, the courts and the party. Some

wrote to the State Council, and not a few addressed their letters to Mao Zedong personally.

In Changsha the provincial authorities received some 1,500 letters or visitors a month. Many wrote to seek redress from a perceived injustice, and a few even ventured to write letters critical enough to be deemed 'reactionary'. Those who presented a specific case with a concrete request had a chance of receiving an answer. After all, within the huge monitoring system of the party bureaucracy, local authorities had to show that they acted on 'requests from the masses'.<sup>42</sup> By March 1961 in Nanjing, around 130,000 letters had been received since the start of the Great Leap Forward. The majority of complaints concerned work, food, goods and services, but a more detailed analysis of 400 letters 'by the masses' showed that one in ten made a direct accusation or threatened to sue.<sup>43</sup> In Shanghai the bureau for handling letters from the public received well over 40,000 items in 1959. People complained about lack of food, poor housing and work conditions, with a few attacking the party and its representatives.<sup>44</sup> The point of a denunciation was to prompt an investigation, and some letters carried enough conviction to spur the authorities into action. After a complaint was sent to the provincial governor of Guangdong alleging that the Institute for Nationalities included dozens of fictitious students on its roster to increase its grain allocation, a local security team was dispatched, and managed to extract several confessions and an apology from the Institute's leaders.<sup>45</sup>

Some readers sent letters to the People's Daily. Few of these were published, but their contents were summarised and circulated among the leadership. Coal miners from Guangxi province, for instance, wrote to complain that some of them fainted on the job because the food rations had been slashed even though their working hours had increased.<sup>46</sup> The State Council received hundreds of letters each month. Some writers were bold enough to attack the policies of the Great Leap Forward and lament the export of grain in the midst of hunger.<sup>47</sup> Some wrote directly to the top leaders. In doing so they reproduced a long-standing imperial tradition of petitioning the emperor, but they also demonstrated their belief that abuses of power were local, not the result of a campaign of collectivisation initiated by Mao himself: 'if only Mao knew'. Justice, surely, had survived in the capital. Letters offered hope. Xiang Xianzhi, a poor girl from Hunan, had a letter addressed to the Chairman stitched inside her coat for a full year before handing it over to an investigation team sent by the provincial party committee.<sup>48</sup> 'Dear Chairman Mao' was a standard opening greeting, for instance in the case of Ye Lizhuang's letter about the starvation and corruption in Hainan. His appeal worked. It led to a lengthy investigation by a high-powered team, which brought to light 'oppression of the people' by local party members.<sup>49</sup>

But many letters never reached their destination. After Liu Shaoqi personally complained to the minister of public security, Xie Fuzhi, that letters sent to him by fellow villagers had been opened by the local police (see Chapter 16), the full extent of the abuse came to light. In Guizhou the post office and the Public Security Bureau routinely opened the mail, which led to the arrest of the authors of denunciations for 'anti-party' or 'counter-revolutionary' activities. When a cadre wrote about mass starvation in Zunyi, he was interrogated for several months and sent to work in a kiln factory.<sup>50</sup> More than 2,000 letters were opened by the police every month in Gaotai county, Gansu. Anonymity, apparently, offered little protection. In one case, He Jingfang mailed eight unsigned letters, but the local police still managed to track him down, extract a confession and send him off to a labour camp.<sup>51</sup> In Sichuan, Du Xingmin's letter denouncing party secretary Song Youyu led to a frantic search throughout the brigade in which writing samples were compared. Du was unmasked and accused of being a saboteur. But before being handed over to the Public Security Bureau, Du had both his eyes gouged out by an enraged Song. He died a few days later in prison.<sup>52</sup> No wonder some people turned to violence instead.

## Robbers and Rebels

Violence was an act of last resort, as desperate farmers assaulted granaries, raided trains or plundered communes. After Cangzhou, Hebei, had been hit by a typhoon in 1961, some villagers armed themselves with sickles to steal the corn from the fields. One party secretary took charge of a brigade and organised raids against neighbouring villages, plundering dozens of sheep and several tonnes of vegetables.<sup>1</sup> Some of these incursions were armed: in one incident a leader in Shaanxi provided the rifles with which a hundred villagers ransacked an adjacent commune and hauled away 5 tonnes of grain. Another local leader headed an armed gang of 260 men who slept rough in the daytime and pillaged at night.<sup>2</sup> In parts of the countryside, large groups would assemble along county and provincial boundaries and make forays across the border, leaving behind a trail of destruction.<sup>3</sup>

But more often than not the target of peasant violence was the state granary. The scale of the attacks was staggering. In one Hunanese county alone thirty out of 500 state granaries were assailed in two months.<sup>4</sup> In the same province the Xiangtan region witnessed over 800 cases of grain theft in the winter of 1960–1. In Huaihua farmers forced open a whole series of barns, taking several tonnes of millet.<sup>5</sup>

Raids on trains were also common. Farmers would gather along a railway and rob freight trains, using the sheer weight of their numbers to overwhelm the guards. This became increasingly common from the end of 1960 onwards, as the regime started to realise the extent of mass starvation and launched a purge of some of the most abusive party members. After provincial boss Zhang Zhongliang had been demoted in Gansu province, some 500 cases of train robbery were reported by the local police in January 1961 alone. The total losses were estimated at roughly 500 tonnes of grain and 2,300 tonnes of coal. And with each assault the crowds grew bolder. At the Wuwei railway station, only a few dozen people caused trouble in early January, but as others joined the fray the crowds swelled into the hundreds. Then, by the end of the month, 4,000 villagers ran amok, bringing to a halt a train from which every detachable portion of property was removed. Elsewhere, near Zhangye, a granary was pillaged from dusk to dawn by 2,000 irate farmers, who killed one of the guards in the process. In another case military uniforms were stolen from a wagon. On the prowl days later, the villagers were mistaken for special forces by the guards in charge of a warehouse and given access to the grain unopposed.<sup>6</sup>

All along the railway line, granaries were attacked, livestock stolen, weapons seized and account books burned. Armed forces and special militia had to be sent in to establish order.<sup>7</sup> Some of the train robberies had diplomatic repercussions, for instance when the assailants of a freight train burned the exhibition goods that were in transit from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the People's Republic of Mongolia.<sup>8</sup> To the credit of the Ministry of Public Security, nobody was ordered to shoot into the crowds, and the police were instructed instead to focus on the 'ringleaders'.<sup>9</sup>

Violence begets violence: sometimes the protective shield outsiders mistook for passivity and submissiveness broke down, and villagers erupted in a blind fury. In heated meetings at which higher quotas were introduced, farmers accused their leaders of starving them to death, some of the more disgruntled ones going so far as to assault and kill local cadres with cleavers.<sup>10</sup> Others armed themselves with sticks and chased cadres suspected of skimming public funds. In Yunyang county, Sichuan, local people unleashed a collective anger upon their leader, who jumped into a pond to his death together with his wife.<sup>11</sup> In the mountainous county of Tongjiang, local team leader Liu Funian was made to kneel on stones and was beaten with a flagpole.<sup>12</sup> But such examples were unusual. Ordinary people may have pilfered, stolen, lied and on occasion torched and pillaged, but they were rarely the perpetrators of violence. They were the ones who had to find ways of 'eating bitterness' – the Chinese saying for enduring hardship – by absorbing grief, accepting pain and living with loss on a devastating scale.

Less overt but equally destructive was arson, although it was not always possible to distinguish between fires started accidentally, for instance by poor villagers trying to stay warm during the winter, and those ignited deliberately as a form of protest. The Ministry of Public Security estimated that at least 7,000 fires caused 100

million yuan worth of losses in 1958 – although it was unable to tell what proportion should be attributed to intentional burning.<sup>13</sup> Dozens of cases of arson were reported every year by the public security organs in Hebei.<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of 1959 there were three times more fires in Nanjing than there had been the previous year. Many were caused by neglect, but not a few were attributed to arsonists. Zhao Zhihai, for instance, started a fire in the dormitory of his factory as a form of protest.<sup>15</sup> Xu Minghong burned four haystacks and was shot dead by the local militia.<sup>16</sup> In Songzi, Hubei, the house of a party secretary was torched.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere in the province angry farmers doused a statue of Mao with petrol and set it ablaze.<sup>18</sup> In Sichuan, Li Huaiwen set fire to the local canteen, which had once been his home, shouting: 'Get the hell out of here, this canteen belongs to me!'<sup>19</sup>

By 1961 pyromania possessed the countryside. Around Guangzhou, hundreds of fires flickered at night in the weeks following the Chinese New Year, many started by farmers demanding their own private plot.<sup>20</sup> In Wengyuan county the villagers scribbled a message on a wall near the granary they had just torched, proclaiming that the grain that was no longer theirs might as well be burned.<sup>21</sup>

As starvation sets in, famished people are often too weak and too focused on their own survival to contemplate rebellion. But inside the vaults of the party archives is plenty of evidence of underground organisations springing up in the last two years of the famine. They never posed a genuine threat to the party and were easily crushed, but they did act as a barometer for popular discontent. Many of these organisations never even got off the ground. In Hunan, for instance, 150 people along a county border armed themselves for rebellion in the winter of 1960–1, but were immediately swept up by local security forces. Near the provincial capital a Love the People Party was set up by a few disgruntled farmers in favour of the freedom to cultivate and trade in agricultural products. They too never stood a chance.<sup>22</sup>

But more credible challenges came from the provinces near Tibet, where an armed uprising in March 1959 was quelled with heavy artillery, resulting in the Dalai Lama's flight to exile. In Qinghai in 1958 open rebellion continued for months on end, at places ranging from Yegainnyin (Henan), close to the Gansu border in the east, to Gyêgu (Yushu) and Nangqen (Nangqian) up in the Tibetan plateau. Some of the rebels were inspired by Lhasa, others were fuelled by Islam. The armed forces in the province were insufficient to deal with the uprisings, and the army initially focused on regaining control of all vital highways.<sup>23</sup>

The region continued to be rocked periodically by local uprisings. In the autumn of 1960, villagers in Xuanwei county, Yunnan, rebelled, an act of subversion that rapidly spread to several communes. The movement was backed by local cadres, including party secretaries in the higher echelons of power. Weapons were seized, and hundreds of discontented villagers rallied around slogans promising the abolition of the people's communes, a free market and a return of the land to the farmers. The army swiftly intervened, capturing and eliminating all but one of the leaders. In his report to Zhou Enlai, top security boss Xie Fuzhi mentioned a dozen similar incidents in the south-western provinces that year.<sup>24</sup> To this had to be added over 3,000 'counter-revolutionary groups' detected by the public security forces: Yunnan alone harboured a hundred groups that referred to themselves as a 'party' (dang).<sup>25</sup>

Secret societies were ruthlessly crushed after 1949, but a long history of state suppression had prepared them for survival against all odds. A survey of one northern province gives an indication of the extent of their continued influence – although the numbers may have been inflated by overzealous cadres keen on more resources to fight the counter-revolution. In Hebei province about forty groups dubbed 'counter-revolutionary' were unmasked within the first few months of 1959. Half of these belonged to secret societies the party had tried to extirpate. Huanxingdao, Shengxiandao, Baguadiao, Xiantiandao, Jiugongdao – there were about a dozen popular religious sects and secret societies active in the province. In Ningjin county alone, close to 4 per cent of the local population was thought to belong to one sect or another, many of them swearing allegiance to the Yiguandao.<sup>26</sup> Some of these societies extended their influence across provincial boundaries. Despite restrictions on the movement of people from the countryside, followers would travel from Hebei to Shandong to pray at the grave of a leader of a village sect called the Heaven and Earth Teaching Society.<sup>27</sup> Everywhere people turned to popular religion, despite party strictures against 'superstition'. In Guangdong, where a ceremony to mark the birthday of the Mother Dragon remained popular, some 3,000 worshippers gathered for the occasion in Deqing in 1960. Even students and cadres joined in.<sup>28</sup>

But nothing could destabilise the regime even in its darkest hour. As in other famines, from Bengal and Ireland

to the Ukraine, most villagers, by the time it became clear that starvation was there to stay, were already too weak even to walk down the road to the next village, let alone find weapons and organise an uprising. In any event, even a mild form of opposition was brutally repressed and severely dealt with: leaders of riots or uprisings faced execution, while others were given an indefinite sentence in a labour camp. What also prevented the country from imploding, even as tens of millions perished, was the absence of any viable alternative to the communist party. Whether they were dispersed secret religions or poorly organised underground parties, none except the regime could control this huge expanse of land. And the potential for a coup from within the army had been averted by extensive purges carried out by Lin Biao after the Lushan plenum in 1959.

Yet something more tenacious than mere geopolitics prevented the appearance of a credible threat to the rule of the party. The most common technique of self-help in times of mass starvation was a simple device called hope. And hope dictated that, however bad the situation was in the village, Mao had the best interests of his people at heart. A common conviction in imperial times was that the emperor was benevolent, but his servants could be corrupt. Even more so in the People's Republic, the population had to reconcile a vision of utopia trumpeted by the media with the everyday reality of catastrophe on the ground. The belief that cadres who were abusive failed to carry out the orders of a beneficent Chairman was widespread. A distant entity called 'the government' and a semi-god called 'Mao' were on the side of good. If only he knew, everything would be different.



## Exodus

The most effective strategy of survival in times of famine was to leave the village. Ironically, for millions of farmers the Great Leap Forward meant departure to the city rather than entry into a commune. As targets for industrial output were ceaselessly revised upwards, urban enterprises started recruiting cheap labour from the countryside, creating a migration of tidal dimensions. More than 15 million farmers moved to the city in 1958 alone, lured by the prospect of a better life.<sup>1</sup> From Changchun, Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai to Guangzhou, cities exploded as, according to the official census, the total urban population ballooned from 99 million in 1957 to 130 million in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

The great outflow from the countryside happened despite formal restrictions on the movement of people. The household registration rules described in Chapter 22 were brushed aside in the rush to industrialisation. But few migrants managed officially to change their place of residence from the village to the city. A great underclass was created, relegated to dirty, arduous and sometimes dangerous jobs on the margins of the urban landscape, and facing discriminatory barriers against assimilation in their place of work. Migrant workers were deprived of the same entitlements accorded city dwellers, for instance subsidised housing, food rations and access to health, education and disability benefits. Most of all they had no secure status, dwelling in a twilight zone of legality and risking expulsion back to the countryside at any time.

This happened in early 1959, as food reserves ran out and the country faced its first winter of hunger. In all major cities, as we have seen, grain reserves fell to historic lows, shortages in industrial centres such as Wuhan being so severe that they risked running out of food within a matter of weeks.<sup>3</sup> The mounting crisis prompted the leadership to ramp up the household registration system, erecting a great wall between city and countryside. As it could provide food, housing and employment only to urban residents, it left farmers to fend for themselves. In order to ease the burden further, the state capped the growth of the urban population. Tough restrictions on the movement of people were imposed by the State Council on 4 February 1959 and again on 11 March 1959, stipulating that the free market in labour could no longer be tolerated and villagers had to be sent back to the countryside.<sup>4</sup> As the police started enforcing the household registration system in Shanghai, it was revealed that in some districts up to a fifth of all families had only temporary residence permits, the majority being farmers from Jiangsu province.<sup>5</sup> An estimated 60,000 villagers resided in the city illegally, most working in the freight and construction industries. In the wake of the State Council's repeated directives, a quarter of a million farmers were rounded up and sent back to the countryside.<sup>6</sup> Adrift between two worlds in the midst of starvation, migrants throughout the country were being forcibly returned to their villages. In the countryside, in turn, local authorities did their best to prevent anybody from leaving for the city, locking people into the famine.

The attempt to impose a cordon sanitaire around cities was defeated by a myriad of factors. The great outflow in 1958 had created patterns of migration and networks of contacts which were used by villagers to return to the city. In Hebei in early 1959 one in every twenty-five agricultural workers was roaming the countryside in search of employment. Those who returned to the village over the Chinese New Year encouraged others to follow, heading back as a group to enterprises where good connections had been established and few questions were asked. Letters were sent from the city, including money and detailed instructions on how to join the exodus. In Xinyang, one of the most devastated regions in Henan, letters came 'incessantly' from Qinghai, Gansu and Beijing, according to local officials – who opened the mail. Li Mingyi sent three letters, including 130 yuan, to his brother, urging him and four other relatives to join him in working for the railway bureau in Xining.<sup>7</sup>

In the village tales were told about life in the city, seen as a haven where rice was plentiful and jobs abounded. Some communes actually supported a form of chain migration by agreeing to take care of children and the elderly, as remittances from workers in the city contributed to the survival of the entire village. From Zhangjiakou, a major hub along the railway to the west of Beijing, a third of a million people vanished during the 1958–9 winter, representing some 7 per cent of the entire workforce.<sup>8</sup>

Even in relatively sheltered provinces such as Zhejiang villagers took to the road in the winter of 1958–9. Some 145,000 people were known to be on the move, although many more must have escaped the attention of

the local authorities tasked with arresting them. As elsewhere, most were headed for a city in search of employment. They were ambitious, the majority intending to travel as far as Qinghai, Xinjiang and Ningxia, where the famine was less intense. But proximity to a city remained a key factor in prompting villagers to flee. In Longquan, for instance, one in ten of all able-bodied villagers crossed into Fujian province, a mere forty kilometres away, while others trekked to the cities of Xiaoshan, Fenghua and Jinhua. Most were young, male workers; the women were left behind to look after the family and the village. In Buxia Village, forty kilometres south of Xiaoshan, 230 workers left in several large groups, including local cadres and members of the Youth League. A significant proportion of these had already experienced the city as factories eagerly recruited from the surrounding villages during the Great Leap Forward. Many absconded in the middle of the night, while others walked away in broad daylight, claiming to visit a sick relative in town. In a few cases cadres themselves wrote letters of reference and provided travel permits, encouraging villagers to pull up stakes and take their chances in the city. Some made a profit by selling blank permits bearing an official stamp.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, for instance further south in Guangdong, local cadres adopted a lenient attitude, sensing that more movement of people could alleviate the famine. In Lantang commune a mere one in seven of all workers in a brigade participated in collective labour. The others performed private work or traded with neighbouring counties, some going as far as Haifeng, over 100 kilometres down the coastline.<sup>10</sup>

Many left in groups, boarding freight trains headed for the city. On one day in March 1959, a group of about a hundred farmers managed to board a train at Kongjiazhuang, Hebei, without buying a single ticket. A few days later, a similar number boarded from Zhoujiahe station, a tiny village in Huai'an.<sup>11</sup> In Hubei, on the stretch from Xiaogan to Shekou, hundreds of farmers would congregate at the station each day and board en masse. Some intended to flee the village, but many simply went to the city to sell wood or visit friends. When asking for a ticket, collectors faced verbal abuse and physical assault. In the chaos of boarding, accidents happened, as weaker fare dodgers fell off the train, including a five-year-old child who had a leg severed in the process.<sup>12</sup>

All these groups amounted to a large number of people on the move. In the first four months of 1960, for instance, over 170,000 farmers escaping from the countryside were found ticketless on trains in Beijing alone, most of them hailing from Shandong, Hebei and Henan. Once on board, every available bit of property was used in the struggle for survival. As one official noted in disgust, they 'wantonly spoil and damage goods, some urinating and defecating on them, a few using high-quality stockings as toilet paper'.<sup>13</sup>

After they had arrived at their destination, many migrants would be met at the station by a friend or by a tout recruiting labour.<sup>14</sup> Others found a job on the black market. Called 'human markets' (renshi) in Beijing, they opened early in the morning as a mob of unemployed men pushed, shoved and jostled for attention as soon as a prospective employer turned up. Most lived in temporary shelters, a few stayed with friends and family. They would work for as little as 1.3 yuan a day, although carpenters could fetch up to 2.5 yuan, the highest salary for skilled labour being 4 yuan. Some were recruited underground by state companies, others were hired by private individuals for menial jobs or domestic service.<sup>15</sup>

The cumulative effect of this outflow could overwhelm the city, despite the cordon sanitaire designed to keep the urban population insulated from the rural famine. Thousands found their way into Nanjing every month, and by the spring of 1959 some 60,000–70,000 refugees had either arrived or transited through the city, overrunning the temporary shelters hastily erected by the municipality. On a single day in February 1959 around 1,500 refugees disembarked. Two-thirds were young men, and most came from the surrounding counties, although a number also hailed from Anhui, Henan and Shandong, the three provinces most affected by famine. A few wanted to visit friends and family, most had no money, and all were in search of a job. Factories and mines secretly recruited them, paying them by piece rate, less than workers with residence permits. Some enterprises actually faked the necessary papers to register them locally, but the vast majority – some 90 per cent of all factories – simply inflated the official number of workers in order to secure sufficient food to feed illegal workers.<sup>16</sup>

Not every migrant found a job on the black market, and some were forced to live a marginal existence in the shadows of the city, stealing, begging, scavenging or selling themselves in order to survive. Kong Fanshun, a twenty-eight-year-old male, was described as a vagrant who would climb walls at night to steal clothes and money. Su Yuyou was caught after he entered a shop, grabbed a large flatbread and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth while making a run for it. Young women could be found soliciting customers in the centre of the city. For a ration coupon worth ten or twenty cents or for a pound of rice they would perform a sexual favour in a quiet corner of a public park. Those who failed faced starvation: some twenty bodies were collected each



month during the harsh winter.<sup>17</sup> All were described as a threat to social order by the local authorities, reinforcing the negative imagery associated with country folk. When they were caught they were sent back to their villages, only to return to the city again after a few weeks.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the refugees, when questioned by officials, told their stories. Yu Yiming, interviewed in May 1959, had been surviving on two bowls of gruel a day in her village in Anxian county. After the cadres turned over all the grain to the state, nothing but cabbage remained. Then all the bark on elm trees and the chestnut tubers vanished, leaving the village depleted. Wang Xiulan, a fellow villager, broke down in tears, crying that 'we are not lying, we have not had any food for several months, everything has been eaten – what can we do?' Other escapees explained how they had managed to abscond under the cover of night. Tao Mintang, from Lishui county, recounted how eleven of them fled as a group one evening, lured by rumours that in Heilongjiang young workers could make up to seventy yuan a month.<sup>19</sup>

Not all migrants lived in the city's dark underbelly, eking out a miserable existence at the mercy of rapacious factory bosses. In the rush towards industrialisation during the Great Leap Forward, some of the most able men recruited from the countryside were given good salaries as incentives to stay.<sup>20</sup> In Pukou, Nanjing's busy port, a team of loaders working on the docks had no right to food rations, reserved for city residents, but they earned about 100 yuan a month, enough to eat in some of the top restaurants. Some made two salaries, making a better living for themselves than most of the registered workers in local factories.<sup>21</sup> A few even specialised in trading ration coupons on the black market. One woman was caught with coupons worth 180 kilos of rice, which she bought in Shanghai to double her money in Nanjing, exploiting one of the countless loopholes in the planned economy by which the same basic commodity was sold at vastly different prices across the country. Most migrants in factories and construction sites were men, but the majority of villagers who left the rural areas to trade were women.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, as the famine went on, whatever leverage some young migrants might have had on a black market desperately short of labour simply vanished, replaced by desperation for a scrap of food. By 1960 in Lanzhou some 210,000 migrants worked in factories without any pay, being given no more than board and lodging. Zhang Zhongliang, the gung-ho boss of Gansu, personally endorsed the arrangement. But outside the provincial capital complicity from the leaders led to conditions of slave labour. In Tongwei, a steel factory locked up migrants and forced them to work themselves to death, refusing to feed them: a thousand died that year, as factory bosses were assured of a steady supply of vagrants and drifters looking for work.<sup>23</sup> Who knows how many factories operated in similar conditions?

As the years of famine went by, the motivations behind migration changed. In a nutshell, the lure of employment was replaced by the compulsion of famine. As a sense of despair grew, some would steal off into the mountains, hoping to survive on berries, insects and possibly small animals. But few actually made it, some being forced to return to the village, emerging from the forest with dishevelled hair and torn clothes, sometimes entirely naked, a wild look in the eyes, so changed that they were no longer recognised.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, when disaster struck, people left en masse, children in tow, their meagre possessions strapped on their backs; local authorities could only stand by and watch the exodus. After the Cangzhou region in Hebei was hit by a typhoon in 1961, listless masses of humanity took to the roads, trailing along in total silence, the only sound being the shuffle of their feet. Entire brigades left collectively – cadres, men, women and children, trading their clothes for taro along the way, with many of the adults and most of the children ending up stark naked.<sup>25</sup> All over the country people died by the roadside.

What was the effect of the exodus on the village? In many cases, villagers and even local cadres supported mass emigration, as they hoped that remittances would allow them to survive. But the countless tales of life in the city, where jobs were easy, the pay was generous and food limitless, must have contributed to a general sense of demoralisation. The revolution, after all, had been fought for the farmers, but all too obviously life in the countryside was inferior to that in the city. The imposition of a cordon, shielding towns from villages, can only have worsened a pervasive feeling of worthlessness; in effect, the countryside was quarantined, as if peopled by lepers. As the best workers were poached by recruiters from the city, villages were sometimes split, as jealous farmers turned against families with migrants in the city, beating them or depriving them of food.<sup>26</sup> And even if some communities may have welcomed migration, they soon found themselves crippled by labour shortages: those who left were overwhelmingly healthy, enterprising young men. Organised flight, on the other

hand, had a domino effect which could deplete some villages of all working adults. In Huai'an county, strategically located by the Beijing–Baotou railway, one village had some fifty working men but a mere seven remained by the spring of 1959; even the head of the village and the party secretary had become drifters looking for work in the city.<sup>27</sup> Where people left because of famine, nothing but ghost villages survived; only those who were too weak to walk stayed behind.

With jobs crying out to be filled during the initial rush of the Great Leap Forward, some of the village officials went after the migrants, trying to persuade them to return home during the busy season. A great many people crossed the border from Hunan into Hubei, following an earlier pattern of migration established during severe shortages in 1957.<sup>28</sup> A team of cadres was dispatched to find the villagers, but they were met with a volley of abuse: the migrants refused to go back to the village where food was rationed. The cadres then turned against the local authorities, accusing them of poaching their people to help build a reservoir. They, instead of the migrants, were thrown behind bars; once released they were forced to make a humiliating retreat back to Hunan.<sup>29</sup> A more subtle approach was tried elsewhere, for instance in Hengshui, Hebei, where half of all the 50,000 migrants from Qingliangdian commune were wheedled into returning home in 1960. Relatives were made to write letters imploring them to come back to the village. Sometimes these letters were hand-delivered by local cadres anxious to ensure that they reached their destination.<sup>30</sup>

But most of the time brute force was used to prevent villagers from leaving. As we shall see in greater detail in a subsequent chapter, local cadres beat, starved and tortured those who tried to flee, or exacted punishment from family members. Throughout the countryside, located at strategic junctions, 'dissuasion stations' (quanzuzhan) or 'custody and deportation stations' (shourong qiansong zhan) were set up by the militia, responsible for arresting people on the run and escorting them back to the village. These centres could arbitrarily detain people without judicial supervision or legal charge, even if they held a temporary residence permit: they survive to this day, specifically targeting beggars and migrant workers. Over 600 were in operation throughout the country at the height of the famine. Eight cities alone – from Guangzhou to Harbin – held more than 50,000 people in such stations by the spring of 1961.<sup>31</sup> In Sichuan in 1960 some 380,000 people were detained and sent back.<sup>32</sup>

Cut off from a social network which could provide a measure of protection, adrift on the road with only the bare essentials, escapees were ideal prey. As the Ministry of the Interior reported in May 1960, in Shandong these stations not only confiscated food coupons, rations and train tickets, but also strung drifters and migrants up and beat them black and blue. Women were molested.<sup>33</sup> In Tianshui, Gansu, one in every eight guards said they had raped a woman, while all of them routinely beat villagers in their custody. A special 'school' was even set up to reform the escapees: they were insulted, spat upon, tied up and forced to kneel or stand for hours on end. Their few possessions were stolen, from small knives, eggs, noodles, wine and rope to socks and trousers. Women were threatened, beaten or starved in order to obtain sexual favours. Many were put to work to cook meals, launder clothes, clean the toilets and wash the feet of the guards. Failure to prepare the noodles of guard Li Guocang properly led three of the inmates to be sent to a 'school' where they were beaten for a whole day.<sup>34</sup>

But however harsh the treatment meted out to refugees, they rarely gave up, and often managed to burst through the fetters of the system. When a group of seventy-five villagers were sent back to Wuhu from Shanghai, sixty managed to escape.<sup>35</sup> A month later 150 out of 250 refugees escorted back north to Shenyang from Tianjin succeeded in absconding. Many were what party officials referred to as 'habitual' refugees (guanliu), escaping from the village again and again.<sup>36</sup> Life on the road might have been bitter, but it was better than waiting for death in the village.

The tide turned in 1961: surrounded by famine, beleaguered by migrants and facing a growing population that could no longer be fed, the leadership in Beijing decided to send back 20 million people from the cities to the countryside. The order came on 18 June 1961, the target being a reduction of 10 million people before the end of the year, leading to savings of 2 million tonnes of grain. The rest would follow in 1962, and stragglers would be swept up by 1963.<sup>37</sup>

The authorities moved fast. In Yunnan, where cities had ballooned from 1.8 million inhabitants in 1957 to 2.5 million by 1961, around 300,000 people, many of them unemployed, were selected in order to fill the quota.<sup>38</sup> Those sent back included 30,000 prisoners from Kunming, relocated to labour camps in the countryside.<sup>39</sup> In the

cities of Guangdong close to 3 million people were unemployed: some 600,000 were moved to the countryside by the end of 1961.<sup>40</sup> In Anhui, where 1.6 million had been added to an urban population of 3.1 million after 1957, some 600,000 people were removed.<sup>41</sup> By the end of the year, state planner Li Fuchun announced that 12.3 million people had been moved, another 7.8 million being targeted for 1962.<sup>42</sup> In the end, the state proved more resilient than the villagers, mercilessly employing new methods of coercion to keep the urban population at an historic low for years to come.

The lucky ones managed to cross the border, but this came at a cost. In Yunnan, where minorities living near Vietnam, Laos and Burma voted with their feet as soon as the Great Leap Forward started, punishment was brutal. Some 115,000 people left the country in 1958 from villages adjacent to the border, protesting against the lack of free trade, restrictions on the freedom of movement, forced collectivisation and hard labour on irrigation schemes. Those caught fleeing were routinely beaten. A young woman with a baby daughter was bayoneted to death in Jinghong, while others were locked up in a house which was then blown up with dynamite. Even those who voluntarily returned to their villages were tortured and executed, their bodies left by the side of the road. The stench of rotting corpses was pervasive.<sup>43</sup> Numbers are hard to obtain, but according to the British Foreign Office some 20,000 refugees arrived in Burma in 1958, most of whom were sent back across the border into China.<sup>44</sup> Given that many of the ethnic minority peoples had relatives on both sides of the border, the total is likely to have been much higher. In the southern provinces frontier people fled to Vietnam. Many were smugglers, but when hunger became too intense they used their knowledge of the terrain to cross the border, never to return.<sup>45</sup>

The exodus took place all along China's extended borders, in particular during a lull in policy enforcement in 1962. What began as a trickle of refugees from Xinjiang became a flood, and by May some 64,000 people had made the crossing, often in large groups, as families with children and their meagre possessions stumbled into the Soviet Union.<sup>46</sup> Half the population of Chuguchak (Tacheng), from cadres to toddlers, marched along the ancient silk road to the border, leaving behind a wasteland.<sup>47</sup> Thousands crossed the border every day at the Bakhta and Khorgos checkpoints on the Kazakhstani–Chinese border, overwhelming the border patrols. Many were weak and ill, turning to the Soviet authorities for help.<sup>48</sup> Millions of rubles were made available to provide the refugees with jobs and temporary housing.<sup>49</sup> In Kulja (Yining) chaos ensued after the Soviet consulate was invaded by an armed mob, eager to take away all archives relating to the nationality of minority people, as only those registered as Soviets could cross the border. Granaries were robbed and shots were fired at the militia.<sup>50</sup> According to Soviet sources, rumours that the local authorities actually sold bus tickets to the border caused mayhem. As crowds gathered around the party offices to demand transportation, they were fired upon, and some of them were killed.<sup>51</sup>

A similar scramble to escape took place at the border in Hong Kong in May 1962. Throughout the famine people managed to make their way to the British colony: in 1959 illegal immigration was estimated at some 30,000.<sup>52</sup> This was on top of legal immigration, with the mainland handing out around 1,500 visas a month to those it no longer needed at home.<sup>53</sup> But in May 1962, as the mainland temporarily relaxed its border controls, a steady flow became a flood, reaching a peak of over 5,000 a day. Overnight, Hong Kong became the free Berlin of the East. The great exodus was well planned, and those who undertook it tended to be young urban residents recently sent to the countryside following factory closures: faced with severe food shortages and abandoned by the system, some decided to flee. Many had money, biscuits, tinned food and a map. Speculators in Guangzhou even sold improvised compasses called Paradise Pointers.<sup>54</sup> Tickets for the border area were on sale at the railway station, although clashes occurred between mobs and police in early June during a riot put down by troops.<sup>55</sup> Those lucky enough to have a ticket boarded a train, but others trekked along the coast or hiked through the hills for several days. When a crowd large enough to overpower the guards had gathered by the border, the refugees made a run for it, swimming across the river that separated the mainland from Hong Kong, scrambling through the barbed-wire entanglements and working their way under the steel mesh of the border fence. Accidents happened. Some refugees mistook a reservoir near the border for the river, and tried to swim across it at night: some 200 bodies were later found floating or washed up against the abutment.<sup>56</sup> Others were smuggled on sampans for a fee, some landing on offshore islands, the unlucky ones capsizing in rough seas and drowning.<sup>57</sup>

Once they had reached Hong Kong, the refugees had to evade British border patrols. Most were arrested on the spot, but a few slipped into the hills, poor, in rags, mostly barefoot, and some with broken ankles. Unlike in Berlin, they were not welcome, as the crown colony feared being swamped by mainlanders. Nobody else offered to take them, with the United States and Canada rigidly sticking to their quotas, and even Taiwan accepting very few for resettlement.<sup>58</sup> The United Nations refugee agency, on the other hand, did not recognise the People's Republic: 'refugees from China' could not exist in political terms and therefore could not be aided under the UNHCR's system.<sup>59</sup> As Hong Kong's colonial secretary Claude Burgess put it, the refugee problem was one that 'no country in the world is in practice willing to share with us'.<sup>60</sup> Only those who could be vouched for by relatives in Hong Kong were allowed to stay, and the vast majority were eventually returned to the mainland. Crowds sympathised with the plight of the refugees, providing food and shelter or obstructing vehicles returning them to the border point at Lo Wu. By June China had closed its border again and the influx ceased as suddenly as it had started.

# The Vulnerable

## Children

Communal nurseries and kindergartens were set up everywhere in the summer of 1958, allowing women to step out of their homes and join the Great Leap Forward. Problems appeared right away, as children were separated from their parents all day long, in some cases for weeks on end. In the countryside retired women and unmarried girls were given crash courses in childcare, but they were quickly overwhelmed by the number of toddlers that parents were required to hand over to the state. And as labour shortages became acute in the rush towards industrialisation, even they were forced to work in the fields and factories, leaving children in minimal care. The buildings of childcare centres were often ramshackle, in some cases not having any fixed premises at all, but making do with a mud hut or an abandoned shed, and allowing the children to run wild.<sup>1</sup> Outside the capital, in Daxing county, a mere dozen out of 475 boarding kindergartens had rudimentary equipment, and more often than not children simply ate and slept on the floor. Many of the buildings had leaking roofs, and some lacked doors and windowpanes altogether. As carers had only a rudimentary training, accidents were frequent, with children bumping into boiling kettles and suffering burns. Neglect was such that in one facility several children aged three to four were unable to walk. In the suburbs clustered around Beijing, a third of all kindergartens were described by the Women's Federation as 'backward'.<sup>2</sup> Even in the capital childcare was basic in the extreme. In the nurseries everybody cried, one report noted: the children forced away from their families would burst into tears first, quickly followed by inexperienced young carers who felt utterly overwhelmed by the pressure, and finally mothers reluctant to entrust their offspring to the state would also start crying.<sup>3</sup>

Lack of qualified staff also led to the use of corporal punishment to maintain a semblance of order in overcrowded kindergartens. This was common even in the cities, one of the worst cases being a female supervisor who used a hot iron to discipline recalcitrant children, and burned a three-year-old on the arm.<sup>4</sup> Poor standards of care and shabby facilities also combined to produce disease. Eating utensils were shared while infected children were not segregated, allowing germs to colonise the kindergarten. Even in the relative oasis of Shanghai, toddlers risked going about all day with faeces in their pants.<sup>5</sup> In Beijing infection rates were high. In the Number Two Cotton Factory, 90 per cent of the children were sick, commonly with measles and chickenpox. Scabies and worms were also widespread. Death rates were high.<sup>6</sup> In the suburbs flies abounded and the kindergartens reeked of urine. Food poisoning was a common occurrence, killing many children. Diarrhoea infected four in five children; some of them also suffered from rickets.<sup>7</sup> With the advance of the famine, oedema became widespread, as bodies started swelling up with water. In Nanjing, two out of three children inspected in a kindergarten suffered from water retention; many also had trachoma (an infectious eye disease) and hepatitis.<sup>8</sup>

Abuse was rife. Food was commonly stolen from kindergartens, as hardened adults pilfered the rations designated for helpless children. This happened in three-quarters of all kindergartens in Guangzhou, either through blatant theft or more subtly via accounting irregularities.<sup>9</sup> In one case in Nanjing, all the meat rationed for the children was taken home by director Li Darao, who also appropriated the entire soap ration. Elsewhere in the city all the meat and sugar was evenly divided up between members of staff.<sup>10</sup> In the countryside abuse was more frequent but less well documented. In November 1960 one or two infants died every day in Qichun county, Hubei: the workers in charge of the premises ate most of the food.<sup>11</sup> In the end, as the state receded in the midst of chaos, the kindergartens simply folded, leaving villagers to fend for their children. To take but one example, the number of childcare institutions in Guangdong declined from 35,000 to 5,400 in 1961 alone.<sup>12</sup>

Children old enough to be sent to school were made to work. A work-study programme, launched by the central government in the autumn of 1957, required all students to participate in productive labour, which in practice could amount to half of all time spent in school. This was before the Great Leap Forward had even started.<sup>13</sup> As the country was mobilised in the steel campaign in the autumn of 1958, children not only collected scrap iron



and old bricks, but actually operated the furnaces, a task so gruelling that some fainted after long shifts in the heat. Hundreds of primary schools in Wuhan opened several factories each in a burst of industrialisation. In the schools children were kept on the premises all day long, sleeping in primitive conditions, sometimes three to a bed in leaking buildings. Teaching was suspended for weeks on end, as the world of collective labour was deemed to be the centre of individual development. Anxious parents had no alternative but to sneak into the school buildings at night to check on the well-being of their children.<sup>14</sup> Then passive resistance took effect, and by early 1959 some students attended formal classes only, opting to skip work experience; a few left school altogether.<sup>15</sup> In Nanjing, many of the truants simply stayed at home, but a quarter found work in factories. Several students worked for the police.<sup>16</sup>

Schoolchildren had to participate in productive labour, but were often put to work without adequate safety measures. Accidents were common and hundreds died throughout the Great Leap Forward. While digging a canal in Gansu, seven students perished as a bank collapsed. In Shandong eight met their ends working in an abandoned kiln when a wall caved in.<sup>17</sup>

In the countryside most children did not have the luxury of school at all. They were expected to work in the fields, carry manure, look after cattle or collect firewood for the canteen. Much of this followed traditional practice, as children in poor families had always been expected to help out. But collectivisation brought in its wake a much harsher regime, one in which labour was the property of the collective rather than the individual or the family. Children were no longer asked to work by parents but bossed around by local cadres instead. Many treated children as if they were adults. Tang Suoqun, a thirteen-year-old girl, was made to carry a forty-one-kilo load of cut grass. Not far away a boy aged fourteen had to haul manure weighing fifty kilos.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the country a stark logic governed relationships between the rulers and ruled. As there was not enough food to go around, the most able workers were given preferential treatment while those considered to be idlers – children, the sick and the elderly – were abused. The party archives provide long and painful lists of examples. Ailong, a thirteen-year-old boy who looked after the ducks in Guangdong, was caught digging up roots for food. He was forced to assume the aeroplane position, was covered in excrement and had bamboo inserted under his nails. The beatings he received were so ferocious that he was crippled for life.<sup>19</sup> In Luoding county, Guangdong, local cadre Qu Bendi beat to death an eight-year-old who had stolen a handful of rice.<sup>20</sup> In Hunan, Tan Yunqing, aged twelve, was drowned in a pond like a puppy for having pilfered food from the canteen.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes parents were forced to inflict the punishment. When a boy stole a handful of grain in the same village in Hunan where Tan Yunqing was drowned, local boss Xiong Changming forced his father to bury him alive. The father died of grief a few days later.<sup>22</sup>

Reprisals were also taken against children as a form of collective punishment. Guo Huansheng, on her own with three children, was refused leave of absence to take her five-year-old son to the hospital. She was a stubborn woman and made her way all alone to Guangzhou without permission, but nonetheless lost her child to disease in the hospital. When she returned home after an absence of ten days she discovered that her two other children had been ignored by the entire village. Covered in excrement, they had worms crawling on their anuses and armpits. Both soon died. Local cadre He Liming then started appearing at her house to bang on the door and denounce her as a shirker. The woman lost her mind.<sup>23</sup> In Liaoja village, near Changsha, one parent escaped to the city, leaving behind two children. The local cadres locked them inside the house, and they starved to death a few days later.<sup>24</sup>

Recalcitrant children were also locked up. In subtropical Guangdong children could be placed inside a hog's cage simply for talking during a meeting.<sup>25</sup> The police helped, putting children aged seven to ten behind bars for stealing small amounts of food in Shuicheng county, Guizhou. One eleven-year-old was locked up for eight months for the theft of a kilo of corn.<sup>26</sup> Larger correctional facilities were established at the county level, designed specifically for children deemed to be incorrigible. In Fengxian county, under the jurisdiction of Shanghai, some 200 children aged six to ten ended up in a re-education camp under the control of the Public Security Bureau: physical punishment included being kicked, standing, kneeling and the insertion of needles into palms; some were handcuffed.<sup>27</sup>

Pressure also came from inside the family. When the parents were too busy working in the fields or taken ill and confined to their beds, the children were in charge of fetching the allocated ration from the canteen, which could be many kilometres away. The children – sometimes as young as four – had to jostle with adults in the canteen, and then carry the food back to the family. The strain was immense, and many of those interviewed today remember vividly how they let their families down on one or another occasion. Ding Qiao'er was a small



girl of eight when she had to look after her entire family, as her father was taken ill and her mother had kidney stones and bound feet, which meant that she could not work for the commune and earn a living. Every day the girl had to queue in the canteen for up to an hour, all the while being pushed aside and bullied by hungry adults. The entire family of six depended on the one bowl of watery porridge she was handed, but one day, after a heavy downpour, the scrawny girl slipped on her way back home and spilt the entire contents. 'I cried, but then I remembered that my parents and the whole family were still waiting for me to bring the food back for them to eat. So I picked myself up and scraped the food up from the ground. It was full of sand.' Her family got angry, blaming her for having wasted the ration on which all depended. 'But in the end they ate the food, slowly, because it was full of sand. If they did not eat it, they would be so hungry that they might go crazy.'<sup>28</sup>

Children fought with each other for food. Although Ding Qiao'er was the child who brought home the family ration, sometimes her parents would give more food to her brothers, depriving her and her younger sister. They argued, they cried and sometimes they even fought with each other over the rations. Liu Shu, who grew up in Renshou county, Sichuan, also remembers how his younger brother filled up his bowl first, leaving next to nothing for the others. 'At each meal, he screamed loudly. Every meal was like that. Because he screamed, he was often beaten.'<sup>29</sup> Li Erjie, a mother of three, recalled that her two sons fought over food every day. 'They fought fiercely. My youngest daughter received the smallest ration, although she always cried for the biggest amount. She cried very loudly to get her way. My other children cursed her for that and still remember it to this day.'<sup>30</sup>

Violence against children inside the family could go much further, as family members became competitors in the presence of insufficient food.<sup>31</sup> Information is difficult to come by, but police reports sometimes get close to the complex family dynamics that developed in times of hunger. In Nanjing about two cases of murder inside the family were reported every month in the middle of the famine. Most of the violence was committed by men and directed against women and children, although one in five victims was an elderly person. In the majority of cases the reason behind murder was that the victims had become a burden. In Liuhe a paralysed girl was thrown into a pond by her parents. In Jiangpu, a dumb and probably retarded child aged eight stole repeatedly from both parents and neighbours, putting the family at risk: he was strangled in the night. A few cases show deliberate starving of a weaker family member. Wang Jiuchang, for instance, regularly ate the ration allocated to his eight-year-old daughter. He also took her cotton jacket and trousers in the middle of the winter. In the end she succumbed to hunger and cold.<sup>32</sup>

In the countryside, following an established tradition the communist party could do little about, children were sold or given away when they could no longer be supported by their own families. In Neiqiu county, Hebei, Chen Zhenyuan was strained to the limit by his family of six, and he gave his four-year-old son to a fellow villager. His seven-year-old was handed over to an uncle in a neighbouring county.<sup>33</sup> In Chengdu, Li Erjie gave one of her three daughters to her sister. But other family members did not like the child, and the mother-in-law was a fierce woman who openly favoured her own grandson: 'We have no food for ourselves, why should we keep another little bitch?' she complained. She took away all of the food earmarked for the adopted child. The girl, who was only four years old, was also sent to fetch vegetables from the canteen every day, having to deal with adults pushing and shoving in the queue. She often fainted from hunger. She was neglected by her adoptive family and was found covered in lice a few months later, when she was taken back by her mother.<sup>34</sup>

Few families were willing to take on an extra burden in the famished countryside, prompting some people to abandon their children. The lucky ones were left behind in a city, some families making a great effort to break through the cordon fencing off the countryside. In Nanjing over 2,000 children were found abandoned in 1959, four times more than in the entire decade of communist rule up to the Great Leap Forward. Six out of ten were girls, and about a third were aged three or older; most were sick, a few blind or handicapped. Judging by the accents of those able to speak, many came from Anhui province, others from villages neighbouring Nanjing. Some of the families were interviewed by community workers. The most common rationale was the very logic of collectivisation, as some villagers gave official propaganda a twist by arguing that 'children belong to the state'. Utopian images of abundance beyond the village, of wealth and happiness ensconced behind city walls, were also important. A common folk notion in the countryside was that a child could 'enter town and enjoy a happy life', as it would be brought up in prosperity.

But more tragic stories lurked behind such rationalisations, for instance in the case of a thirteen-year-old boy called Shi Liuhong. He was taken on a trek across the mountains from his home village in Hujiang. Tired and hungry, he fell asleep by the side of the road, only to find that his mother had gone when he woke up. This was

one of the most common ways of 'losing' a child. The verb 'lose' (diu) was often used as a euphemism for abandonment. As a thirteen-year-old girl recounted, her father had died three years earlier and there was no food in the village. Her mother had first 'lost' her blind brother, aged fourteen; then her younger brother and sister were 'lost' in the mountains, before she too was left behind.<sup>35</sup>

As the last example shows, some children were abandoned in pairs, perhaps because the parents hoped that they might stay together. On the streets of Nanjing a six-year-old was thus found crying for his mother and holding on to two younger toddlers. But other reasons also accounted for the abandonment of siblings. Some were left on the streets because women from the countryside – desperate for food and shelter – 'remarried' men in the city who did not welcome children.<sup>36</sup> Some had their date of birth scribbled on a piece of paper pinned to their clothes, others carried a written note in a pocket. In a few rare cases, desperate mothers took their children straight to the police station.<sup>37</sup>

There are no reliable statistics on the number of abandoned children, but in a city like Nanjing several thousand were found in a single year. In Wuhan, the capital of Hunan, four or five were picked up by the authorities each day by the summer of 1959.<sup>38</sup> In the province as a whole some 21,000 children were placed in state orphanages by the summer of 1961, although many more were never recorded by the authorities.<sup>39</sup>

But in most cases children stayed with their parents to the very end. Across the countryside, in countless villages, starving children with swollen bellies and pipe-stem limbs, their heavy heads wobbling on thin little necks, were left to die in peasant huts, by empty fields or along dusty roadsides. In some villages in Jinghai county, Hebei, children aged four to five were unable to walk. Those who could wore nothing but an unlined garment, shuffling barefoot through the snow in the winter.<sup>40</sup> Even in cities such as Shijiazhuang half of the babies died because their mothers had no milk.<sup>41</sup> In some cases, children were almost the only ones to die. In a small village in Qionghai county, Guangdong, forty-seven people, or one in ten, died in the winter of 1958–9: of these, forty-one were infants and children, six were elderly.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, against all odds, sometimes the children were the ones who survived. In Sichuan it was estimated that 0.3 to 0.5 per cent of the rural population were orphans – meaning roughly 180,000 to 200,000 children without parents. Many roamed the villages in ragged groups, unwashed and unkempt, surviving on their wits – which, most of the time, meant theft. Children on their own were easy prey, stripped of their meagre belongings – cups, shoes, blankets, clothes – by their guardians or neighbours. Discarded by acquaintances once they had robbed her of her every possession, Gao Yuhua, a girl aged eleven, slept on a hay bed and had a mere loincloth to cover herself. She stayed alive by crushing grains of millet which she ate raw, and was described by an investigation team as resembling a 'primitive child' from the Stone Age.<sup>43</sup> Xiang Qingping was adopted by a poor farmer in Fuling, but after the twelve-year-old had complained to neighbours that the man abused him and gave him mud to eat, his head was bashed in. Elsewhere in the county an orphan had his spine broken by angry villagers who caught him stealing from the fields.<sup>44</sup> When siblings survived it was not uncommon for them to turn on each other. Among many reported cases, Jiang Laosan, aged seven, was beaten and robbed by his brother aged sixteen, dying a few months after becoming an orphan.<sup>45</sup>

Some of the orphans showed extraordinary resilience, as the story of Zhao Xiaobai, a soft-spoken woman with sad eyes, shows. A few years before the Great Leap Forward her family left their native village in Henan to join a migration programme encouraging farmers to settle in Gansu province. Her father was made to break ice in the mountains but died of hunger in 1959. Her mother was too ill to work. One of the local cadres came to the house, banging on the door to announce that slackers would not be fed. Another local bully came at night, pestering her mother for sexual favours. In the end, exhausted, she seems to have given up. In the middle of a freezing night in January 1960, she got up and went to the toilet. Her daughter Zhao Xiaobai, aged eleven, woke up and asked her mother where she was going. Then she fell asleep again, but two hours later her mother was still in the toilet. 'I called out to her, but she did not answer. She just sat there, with her head towards one side, but she said nothing.'

Surrounded by strangers speaking an alien dialect, Zhao and her sister aged six ended up living with an uncle, who had also migrated to Gansu. 'He was reasonable towards me, because I was old enough to go out and work. But he was not nice to my sister. You know in Gansu, it was very cold, minus 20 Celsius. He asked my sister to go out looking for kindling in such freezing weather. How could she find any wood? One day, as it was freezing, she came home empty-handed. So he beat her on the head, and she bled pretty badly.' To protect her sister from her uncle's abuse, Zhao took the six-year-old with her as she went to work like an adult, digging canals and ploughing fields. Here too she was unsafe. 'Once, as I was working, I heard my little sister crying,

and I saw somebody hurting her. Somebody was using sand balls to hit my sister, and she was surrounded by clumps of sand. Her eyes were covered in grit, and she just cried and cried.' Zhao found a couple who were planning to return to Henan. She sold everything they had and bought two tickets at ten yuan. Back in Henan, at last, they found her grandmother who took the two girls under her wing. When asked how she had become the woman she is now, Zhao Xiaobai answered without hesitation: 'Through suffering.'<sup>46</sup>

Some children never found anybody willing to look after them and were placed in orphanages, where conditions – rather predictably – were appalling. Physical punishment was common, for instance causing a dozen to die at the hands of their guardians in one commune in Dianjiang county, Sichuan.<sup>47</sup> In Hubei orphans were sheltered in ramshackle buildings with leaking roofs and left to survive the winter without padded cotton clothes or blankets. Medical care was non-existent. Many thousands died of disease.<sup>48</sup>

Although infants died in disproportionate numbers, fewer of them were actually born during the famine. Demographic experts have relied on the published census figures of 1953, 1964 and 1982 to try to piece together the decline in births during the famine, but much more reliable figures are available from the archives, as in a command economy local authorities had to keep track of the population. In the Qujing region, Yunnan, where the famine appeared in 1958, births dropped from 106,000 in 1957 to 59,000 the following year. In Yunnan as a whole the number of births plummeted from 678,000 in 1957 to 450,000 in 1958.<sup>49</sup>

Another way to look at it is to find age-related statistics compiled after the famine. In Hunan, a province which was not among the worst-hit regions, a very clear gap appears among children aged three in 1964, that is born in 1961: there were some 600,000 fewer of them than six-year-olds, although they too must have suffered. On the other hand there were four times more children aged one, and four times more children under the age of one.<sup>50</sup> But none of these statistics recorded what must have been countless unreported cases of infants dying within weeks of being born: who had any incentive to count the deaths of newborns whose births had not even been recorded in the middle of starvation?

## Women

Collectivisation, designed in part to liberate women from the shackles of patriarchy, made matters worse. Although work patterns varied hugely from one end of the country to the other, in most of the north women rarely worked in the fields before the Great Leap Forward. Even in the southern regions, it was often only the poor who joined the menfolk outdoors. Besides taking care of domestic work, women and even children usually engaged in other occupations, making handicrafts in their spare time to supplement the family's income. Entire villages sometimes specialised in producing a defined range of commodities for local markets, from paper umbrellas, cloth shoes and silk hats to rattan chairs, wicker creels and twig baskets, all from the safety of the household.<sup>1</sup> Even in more isolated villages, women by custom worked from home, weaving, spinning and embroidering for family and for cash.

As women who had never worked in the fields were mobilised in the rush to modernise, they were required to turn up every day at the sound of the bugle, and march off in teams to plough, sow, rake, weed and winnow. But despite full employment in communes, women were paid less than men, no matter how hard they toiled. The work-point system devised by the communes systematically devalued their contribution, since only strong men were able to reach the top of the scale. And as women joined the collective workforce, the state did very little to lighten the load at home, as there was no shortage of domestic tasks which still needed to be carried out, from mending clothes to raising children. Kindergartens, for instance, were supposed to help with babysitting, but, as we have seen, many were far from adequate, which meant that women often had to juggle childcare with full employment.<sup>2</sup> As family life was buffeted by constant campaigns, the exigencies of mobilisation took a heavy toll on women, exhausting many even before famine began to bite. In those villages drained of able-bodied men who joined the exodus to the city, women were left to look after relatives and dependants.

Most of all, women were vulnerable because in a regime which mercilessly traded food for work every weakness led to hunger. In the relentless drive to achieve ever higher targets, at the furnace, in the field or on the factory floor, menstruation was widely seen as a flaw. Menstrual taboos of popular religion, which feared the polluting potential of women during their periods, were swept aside seemingly overnight. Failure to come out to the field was punished, the most common form of retribution being a reduction of work points for each day of absence. Some male cadres abused their positions of power, humiliating those women who asked for sick leave. Xu Yingjie, party secretary of the Chengdong People's Commune in Hunan, forced those who requested a rest on the grounds of menstruation to drop their trousers and undergo a cursory inspection. Few were willing to undergo the humiliation, and many became ill as a result, several dying under the strain of labouring while suffering severe menstrual pain or gynaecological problems.<sup>3</sup> Expectant mothers were also compelled to work, often until the last stage of pregnancy, although they too were commonly penalised. In one district in Sichuan alone twenty-four women miscarried after being compelled to work in the fields. Chen Yuanming, who objected, was kicked between her legs by the cadre in charge and crippled for life.<sup>4</sup>

Where abusive cadres assumed power unopposed, punishment could go much further. In the same Hunan commune just mentioned, pregnant women who did not appear at work were made to undress in the middle of the winter and then forced to break ice.<sup>5</sup> In Qingyuan, Guangdong, hundreds of villagers at a time were made to work in the middle of the winter without cotton-padded clothing; no exceptions were made for pregnant women or those with small children, and people who protested were deprived of food.<sup>6</sup> In Panyu county, just outside Guangzhou, a cadre grabbed seven-months-pregnant Du Jinhao by her hair and forced her to the ground for not working sufficiently hard. He kept her pinned down and shouted abuse at her until she passed out; her husband cried with fear but was powerless to intervene. After she regained consciousness she staggered back home looking dazed, then sank to her knees, collapsed and died.<sup>7</sup> Some women were so desperate that they preferred to die: Liang Xianü, pregnant yet obliged to work in the winter, jumped to her death in a cold river.<sup>8</sup>

Exhausted and hungry, women became so weak that they stopped menstruating altogether. This was common everywhere, even in the cities, where women were given some medical care. In the Tianqiao district, to the



south of Beijing, half of all female workers in a metallurgy factory suffered from lack of menstrual periods, vaginal infections or a prolapsed uterus. As the only available washroom was always occupied, some of the women went for months without ever washing. When combined with endless hours in a poorly ventilated environment, even political activists like Yuan Bianhua would spit blood and sometimes even lacked the strength to stand up on their own.<sup>9</sup> Other studies, conducted by the Women's Federation, made similar observations. In the Beijing Electron Tubes Plant, for instance, half of all 6,600 women had some form of gynaecological disorder. Wu Yufang, aged twenty-five, had arrived at the factory as a sturdy young girl in 1956 but in 1961 suffered from headaches, irregular menses, sleeplessness, irritability and lack of strength. Married for five years, she was still without children – a medical examination showed that she, like many of the other workers, had mercury poisoning.<sup>10</sup>

The physical decline among rural women was so extreme that many suffered from a prolapsed uterus, meaning that the womb, held in place inside the pelvis by muscles and ligaments, collapsed inside the vaginal canal. Even without overwork and lack of food, weakness can cause the uterus to sag or slip out of its normal position. This happens when women experience a difficult childbirth or suffer from a loss of oestrogen. But the term refers to a variety of different stages, from a drooping cervix to the uterus coming completely outside the vagina: the latter was the syndrome observed again and again by medical authorities. The statistics they provided – even if classified – could not possibly reflect the reality, and varied from 3 to 4 per cent of women in the countryside just outside Shanghai to one in every five working women in Hunan.<sup>11</sup> The real incidence must have been much higher, given that many women would have felt too ashamed to report the condition, many cadres would have been reluctant to report medical disorders associated with starvation, and too few trained doctors actually existed in the countryside to have even a rough idea of what was happening.

A prolapsed uterus was difficult to cure because the underlying causes – lack of food and lack of rest – were hard to remedy in times of famine. Even if they had money to pay the fees, many women simply did not have the time to leave their children and their work to visit a hospital, which were few and far between in the countryside. Many villagers also feared hospitals, and they resorted instead to local treatments. In Hubei, female healers used a variety of recipes, some handed down from generation to generation, to assist women suffering from gynaecological problems, heating and grinding ingredients into a powder that was smeared on to the vaginal walls and mixing medicinal herbs to cure menstrual disorders. Aunt Wang, as she was known in a village in Zhongxiang county, helped hundreds of women, her house often harbouring four or five patients being nursed back to health as her husband went foraging for leaves and roots in the forest.<sup>12</sup> But such traditional remedies were rarely tolerated under forced collectivisation, and in the absence of effective medical care most women simply had to bear their condition and labour on.

Women were vulnerable in other ways. Socially marginalised in what remained, after all, a tough, male-oriented world, they were prone to sexual abuse. Huge power was given to local cadres, while famine gradually eroded the moral fabric of society. As if this combination were not bad enough, many families were separated or broken up as menfolk joined the exodus, enrolled in the army or laboured on distant irrigation projects. As the layers of social protection surrounding women gradually crumbled, they were left almost entirely defenceless to confront the naked power of the local bully.

Rape spread like a contagion through a distressed moral landscape. A few examples will suffice. Two party secretaries of a commune in Wengcheng, north of Guangzhou, raped or coerced into sex thirty-four women in 1960.<sup>13</sup> In Hengshui county, Hebei, three party secretaries and a deputy county head were known to have sexually abused women routinely, one of them having had sex with several dozen.<sup>14</sup> Further north, a secretary of Gujiaying village raped twenty-seven women, and an investigation showed that he had 'taken liberties' with almost every unmarried woman in the village.<sup>15</sup> Li Dengmin, party secretary of Qumo, raped some twenty women, two being under age.<sup>16</sup> In Leiyang, Hunan, girls as young as eleven or twelve were sexually abused.<sup>17</sup> In Xiangtan, a cadre set up a 'special team' (zhuanyedui) of ten girls whom he sexually abused at whim.<sup>18</sup>

And even if women were not raped, they were subjected to sex-specific humiliations, as collectivisation swept aside the customary moral values of sexual restraint and bodily propriety. China was undergoing a revolution, turning upside down moral codes of behaviour passed down from generation to generation, which led to perversions that would have been unthinkable before 1949. In a factory in Wugang county, Hunan, local bosses forced women to work naked. On a single day in November 1958 more than 300 went about their jobs in the

nude. Those who refused were tied up. A competitive system was even devised by which the women most eager to strip were granted a reward, the top gift consisting of cash to the value of fifty yuan, more or less equivalent to a month's salary. While some women may have embraced the opportunity to advance their careers, many were no doubt repelled, although nobody dared to speak their mind. But a few did write. After some of the women fell ill – Hunan can be bitterly cold during the winter – a series of anonymous letters were sent to Mao Zedong. Whether he actually read these letters we do not know, but someone highly placed in Beijing phoned the provincial committee in Changsha and demanded an inquiry. The factory leaders, it came to light in the course of an investigation, had apparently 'encouraged' the women to take off their clothes in a 'spirit of emulation' which aimed to 'break feudal taboos'.<sup>19</sup> Seemingly anything could be justified in the name of emancipation.

Equally crude and humiliating were the nude parades, which happened across the country: women, occasionally men, were made to march through the village entirely naked. In Suichang county, Zhejiang, men and women accused of larceny were stripped naked and paraded. Zhou Moying, a grandmother aged sixty, was forced to undress and then lead the procession by beating a gong – despite the pleas for pardon from fellow villagers.<sup>20</sup> Some of the abused women felt too ashamed to return to their homes. Twenty-four-year-old Zhu Renjiao, stripped and paraded for petty theft, 'felt too ashamed to face people' and asked to be moved to another village. She killed herself when her request was turned down.<sup>21</sup> In another small village in Guangdong, the militia stripped two young women and tied them to a tree, using a flashlight to explore one of the girl's private parts, and drawing a large turtle – symbol of the male organ – on the other woman's body. Both committed suicide.<sup>22</sup>

Less often mentioned in the archives or in interviews, but part of a distinct social trend in any famine, was the trade in sex. Women provided favours for almost anything, from a morsel of food and a better job to a regular but illicit relationship with a man who could offer some sense of security. Most of these transactions went on undetected, but there was also a whole underworld of prostitution which the authorities tried to monitor. One correctional facility in Chengdu kept well over a hundred prostitutes and delinquent female children. More than a dozen were sex workers who had been 're-educated' after the communist victory in 1949, but refused to reform themselves. Wang Qingzhi, who went by the nickname of 'Old Mother', in turn introduced other women to the trade. Some of the new sex workers formed bands with male thieves and roamed the country, travelling to Xi'an, Beijing and Tianjin to make a living. A few worked independently, one or two even regularly handing over money to their parents – who turned a blind eye to the source of the income.<sup>23</sup>

Village women also offered their bodies for food after escaping to the city, as we have already seen. The logical extension of this trade in sex was bigamy, as country girls lied about their age or their marital status in order to secure a husband in town. Some were only fifteen or sixteen, well below the legal age of marriage. Others were already married but committed bigamy to survive. A few were prepared to abandon their children from a previous marriage, but not all of them deserted their families: some returned home only a few days after the wedding had taken place.<sup>24</sup>

Trade in sex flimsily disguised by the pretence of marriage was even more common in the countryside. In one closely studied Hebei village the number of weddings increased seven-fold in 1960, the worst year of the famine. Women poured into the village from distressed areas, marrying for goods, clothes or food for relatives. Some were as young as sixteen, others left soon after the wedding. A few of the women introduced other family members to the groom, resulting in half a dozen cases of bigamy.<sup>25</sup>

And then there was trafficking in women. From Inner Mongolia, for instance, teams spread out over the country, hauling back hundreds of women every month. Most came from famished Gansu, a few from Shandong. Some were mere children, others were widows, although married women were also trafficked. The victims ranged across all social categories, including students, teachers and even cadres. Few came voluntarily, and some were traded several times. Forty-five women were sold to a mere six villages in less than half a year.<sup>26</sup>

Always marginalised, sometimes humiliated, invariably exhausted and often abandoned by the men, women, in the end, were the ones who had to make the most heart-rending decision, namely how the meagre food ration should be divided. This was not so at the onset of famine, as men were normally in charge and demanded to be fed first. In the same way that women were systematically given fewer work points than men under collectivisation, a patriarchal society expected that priority be given to the feeding of all male members of the

household. As men provided, women abided, a cultural imperative that dictated that even in normal times women were given a smaller share of the food. And as famine took over, women were deliberately neglected in the interests of male survival, a choice that was justified on the grounds that the entire family ultimately depended on the ability of men to go out and find food. But once the men were gone, women had to endure the agony of their starving children without being able to help. Not all could live with the constant crying and pleading for food by their children, made so much more unbearable by the stark choices they had to make about the distribution of scarce resources. Liu Xiliu, deprived of food for six days as punishment for being too sick to work, finally succumbed to the pangs of hunger and devoured the ration allocated to her child, who soon started crying of misery. Unable to suffer the torment she swallowed caustic soda to put an end to her life.<sup>27</sup>

There is no doubt that the emotional distress and physical pain – to say nothing of the self-abasement and humiliation many had to endure – were enormous, and much of this was a direct consequence of sex discrimination. But historians have shown that in many other poor, patriarchal societies women did not die in much greater numbers than men, however problematic recorded rates of mortality may be. In the Bengal famine, male mortality even exceeded that of females, leading the historian Michelle McAlpin to write that 'females may be better able than males to withstand the trials of a period of famine'.<sup>28</sup> As we have seen in previous chapters, women excelled at devising everyday strategies of survival, from foraging in the forest and preparing substitute foodstuffs to trading on the black market. In the end, the greatest victims of the famine were the young and the elderly.



## The Elderly

Life in the countryside has always been tough in China, and strict observance of traditional notions of filial piety would simply have been beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest households before the communist take-over. Proverbs suggested the limits of respect for the elderly in traditional society: 'With nine sons and twenty-three grandchildren, a man may still have to dig a grave for himself.'<sup>1</sup> Even if children were the family pension, the elderly continued to rely for the most part on their own work to eke out a frugal life. And while some prestige may have been associated with old age, in a society that heavily emphasised earning power many people must have felt a decline in respect when moving into old age. As elsewhere, the elderly feared loneliness, impoverishment and abandonment, in particular those who were more vulnerable than others – the ones without family. But in most cases, before 1949, they could count on a measure of care and dignity: their mere survival commanded respect.

Yet by the time of the Cultural Revolution a completely different set of values seemed to dominate, as young students tortured their teachers and Red Guards attacked elderly people. When did the moral universe turn upside down? While the party was steeped in a culture of violence, fostered by decades of ruthless warfare and ceaseless purges, the real watershed was the Great Leap Forward. As villagers in Macheng complained, the people's communes left children without their mothers, women without their husbands, and the elderly without relatives:<sup>2</sup> these three family bonds were destroyed as the state was substituted for the family. As if this were not bad enough, collectivisation was followed by the agony of famine. As hunger stalked an already distressed social landscape, family cohesion unravelled further; starvation tested every tie to the limit.

The prospects for the elderly without children were particularly grim, so much so that many traditionally tried to join monasteries or nunneries, while others established fictitious ties of kinship with adopted children. These age-old customs were swept away with collectivisation. In the summer of 1958 retirement homes for the childless elderly appeared throughout the villages of rural China; at the peak of the Great Leap Forward over 100,000 of them were reportedly established.<sup>3</sup>

Abuse was rife. Some of the elderly were beaten, even those with only a few meagre possessions were robbed, and others were put on a slow starvation diet. In Tongzhou, just outside Beijing, the head of the retirement home systematically stole food and clothes earmarked for the elderly, condemning the inmates to a winter without heating or cotton-padded jackets. Most passed away as soon as frost appeared, although their bodies were not buried for a week.<sup>4</sup> Further south, in Qionghai county, Guangdong, the entire village was put to work in the absence of able-bodied men, who were all conscripted on a distant irrigation project. The elderly slaved day and night, a seventy-year-old going for ten days without any sleep at all. A tenth of the village died in the winter of 1958–9, the majority of them children and those elderly people kept in retirement homes.<sup>5</sup> In Chongqing county, Sichuan, the director of one home made the residents work nine hours a day followed by two hours of study in the evening. In another case the elderly were forced to work throughout the night, according to the demands of 'militarisation'. Slackers were tied up and beaten or deprived of food. In Hunan too they were routinely tied up and beaten.<sup>6</sup> In Chengdu, in the winter, the inmates of one retirement home slept on a muddy floor: they had no blankets, no cotton-padded clothes, no cotton hats and no shoes.<sup>7</sup> In Hengyang, Hunan, the medicine, eggs and meat reserved for the elderly went to the cadres in charge of the home. As the cook succinctly put it, 'What point is there in feeding you? If we feed the pigs at least we will get some meat!' In the province as a whole, by the end of the famine a mere 1,058 had managed to survive in the remaining seven homes.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the homes collapsed almost as soon as they had appeared, besieged by the same systemic problems of funding and corruption which undermined kindergartens. The childless elderly who were abandoned to the care of collective entities had to scramble for survival by the winter of 1958–9. But life outside the retirement home was no better. Just as children were treated like adults, the elderly too had to prove their worth to the collective, as rations in the canteen were dished out against work points. Hunger was never simply a matter of lack of resources, but rather of their distribution: confronted with shortages in both labour and food, local cadres

all too often decided to exchange the one for the other, in effect creating a regime in which those unable to perform at full capacity were being slowly starved to death. The elderly, in short, were dispensable. And just as children were harshly chastised even for small misdemeanours, so the elderly were subjected to an exacting regime of discipline and punishment, in which the family often shared. In Liuyang county, Hunan, a seventy-eight-year-old who complained about working in the mountains was detained and his daughter-in-law ordered to hit him. After she had refused she was beaten bloody. Then she was ordered to spit on the old man, who had also been beaten to a pulp: he died shortly afterwards.<sup>9</sup>

Inside the family the fortunes of the elderly depended on the goodwill of their children. All sorts of quarrels developed in times of famine, but new bonds also developed. Jiang Guihua remembered that her mother did not get on well with her blind grandmother. The grandfather was a cripple. Both were dependent on others for food but also for help in getting dressed and using the toilet. Jiang Guihua was the one to provide help, as her mother often lost her temper and tried to cut their food rations. But there was little she could do, and after a while her grandparents died of eating soil. They were buried without a coffin, wrapped in some straw and lowered into a shallow pit.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, when everybody left the village in a desperate search for food, only the elderly and the handicapped stayed behind, often unable to walk. In Dangyang, Hubei, seven people were all that remained of a once lively and noisy village, four being elderly, two blind and one handicapped. They ate leaves from the trees.<sup>11</sup>

## Ways of Dying



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=



also rainbow colors mocks symbol for God from OT.  
This is deliberate. Also Josephs coat mocking as well.

knowledge of  
good and evil



## Accidents

Poor safety was endemic to the command economy, despite detailed labour legislation and meticulous rules on every aspect of industrial work, from the provision of protective clothing to the standards of lighting. An extensive network of labour inspectors – from the Federation of Trade Unions, the Women's Federation and the Communist Youth League, as well as from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour – periodically toured workshops, monitored health hazards and looked into the living standards of workers. They operated under huge political pressure and often preferred to turn a blind eye to widespread abuse, but they could file hard-hitting reports. Despite this vast apparatus, factory managers and team leaders, regardless of their personal sympathies for their workers, remained obsessed with increased output.

On the ground both zealots and dawdlers set the tone. Party activists cut corners, reduced standards, ignored safety and abused the workforce as well as every piece of equipment in their relentless quest to meet higher production targets. On the factory floor and in the fields, ordinary people tried to counter the blow of each new production drive with the force of collective inertia. But widespread apathy and negligence, while easing the pressure from above, also had a corrosive effect on safety in the workplace, as people abdicated responsibility for anything that did not concern them directly. And as collectivisation produced growing shortages of food, clothes and fuel, much riskier techniques of self-help appeared, from lighting a stove in a thatched hut to stealing safety equipment, leading in turn to more accidents. Worker fatigue only made matters worse, as people fell asleep by the furnace or at the wheel.

To this should be added a simple if grisly calculation: failure to fulfil a target could cost a manager his career, while violation of labour safety attracted a mere slap on the wrist. Life was cheap, costing a lot less than installing safety equipment or enforcing labour legislation. After all, what were a few deaths in the battle for a better future? As we have seen, foreign minister Chen Yi, comparing the Great Leap Forward to a battlefield, was adamant that a few industrial accidents were not going to hold back the revolution: 'it's nothing!' he said with a shrug.<sup>1</sup>

Take the case of fire. We have noted how the Ministry of Public Security estimated that some 7,000 fires destroyed 100 million yuan in property in 1958, the year of the Great Leap Forward. One reason for the extent of the damage was a lack of firefighting equipment. Most of the fire hoses, pumps, extinguishers, sprinklers and other tools had been imported, but foreign purchases were suspended in a drive towards local self-sufficiency. By the end of 1958, however, all but seven out of the eighty national factories making the equipment had closed down. In some cases firefighters had to stand by empty-handed and watch the flames spread, powerless to intervene.<sup>2</sup>

The situation did not improve over the following years. Workers in overcrowded shacks cobbled together from mud, bamboo and straw huddled around improvised fires, which sometimes got out of control. Hundreds of fires raged through Nanjing in a single month in 1959.<sup>3</sup> Accidents also happened when people sneaked away from the canteen to cook their own meals on the sly. When a young girl lit a fire in dry weather, the wind carried a spark and set fire to her hut, which erupted into a blaze destroying lives and property.<sup>4</sup> When a kerosene lamp was kicked over during engineering work at Jingmen, Hubei, an inferno claimed sixty lives.<sup>5</sup> Villagers recruited to work on large irrigation sites lived in hastily erected straw huts, which regularly went up in flames as exhausted workers bumped into lamps or furtively lit a cigarette.<sup>6</sup> Few reliable statistics exist about actual death rates, but in Jiangxi a mere twenty-four incidents burned or asphyxiated 139 people in a single month.<sup>7</sup> In Hunan about fifty people died each month; the Public Security Bureau listed some ten fires a day in the first half of 1959.<sup>8</sup>

Industrial accidents soared, as safety was considered a 'rightist conservative' concern. In Guizhou the provincial party committee estimated that the number of accidental deaths had multiplied by a factor of seventeen in early 1959 compared to a year earlier.<sup>9</sup> The exact number of casualties was unknown, as few inspectors wanted to pour cold water on the Great Leap Forward with talk of death, while enterprises routinely concealed accidents. Li Rui, one of Mao's secretaries purged in the wake of the Lushan plenum, later estimated

the total of fatal industrial mishaps in 1958 at 50,000.<sup>10</sup> According to the Ministry of Labour, some 13,000 workers died in the first eight months of 1960, equivalent to over fifty deaths each day. Although this was probably only a fraction of the actual accidents, the report highlighted some of the problems which beset the mining and steel industries. In the Tangshan Iron Plant more than forty powerful blast furnaces were jammed together in a square kilometre, but no protective fences were erected around the cooling basins. Workers slipped and fell into the boiling sludge. In coal mines across the country, inadequate ventilation allowed asphyxiant and highly inflammable gases to accumulate. Coal-gas explosions ripped through the mines, sometimes ignited by the sparks coming from faulty electrical equipment. Flooding was another mining hazard which claimed numerous lives, while badly maintained mine stopes collapsed and buried the miners alive.<sup>11</sup> In March 1962, a blast tore through the Badaojiang mine, Tonghua county, Jilin, claiming seventy-seven lives, although the worst case was probably in the Laobaitong mine in Datong, where 677 miners died on 9 May 1960.<sup>12</sup>

But explosions also happened routinely in smaller concerns, although such cases were no doubt excluded from the statistics gathered by the Ministry of Labour. In Hunan a critical report noted how mining accidents had increased every quarter since the launch of the Great Leap Forward. By early 1959 an average of two miners every day were killed in an accident somewhere in the province.<sup>13</sup> In the Guantang mine in Nanjing – opened during the Great Leap Forward – three heavy detonations occurred in a fortnight, among other accidents described as ‘avoidable’. Lamps fell down shafts, safety belts were discarded and inexperienced workers were sent down into the mines without proper training, sometimes barefoot. Shafts and tunnels were dug in a manner described a few years later as ‘chaotic’, in utter disregard of local geology.<sup>14</sup>

The coal mines claimed more lives than any other industry, but everywhere death was on the increase. Dirt and clutter encumbered the workshops, uncollected litter and abandoned parts were strewn about passageways, while a chronic lack of lighting, heating and ventilation turned the factory floor into an intrinsically hazardous environment. Most workers did not even have a uniform, let alone protective clothing. In Nanjing lethal blasts occurred every month from 1958 onwards, as concerns over the safety of workers were discarded in the pursuit of higher targets.<sup>15</sup> Many of the factories were hastily set up and badly conceived during the Great Leap Forward: in several cases entire roofs caved in on the workers.<sup>16</sup>

The situation was not much better when it came to public transportation. Inexperienced drivers joined an expanding fleet; weight and speed limits were flouted if not denounced as rightist; while trucks, trains and boats were poorly maintained and driven beyond endurance, often breaking down only to be patched back together with substandard equipment and scavenged pieces. Figures, again, are missing, but the extent of the problem is indicated by a summary report from Hunan. On the roads and rivers criss-crossing the province, more than 4,000 accidents were reported in 1958, claiming 572 lives. In one case a blind man and his handicapped colleague operated a ferry.<sup>17</sup> In the neighbouring province of Hubei, boats often navigated in the dark, as lamps and lighting were missing. On Macang Lake, Wuhan, an overloaded passenger ship without any safety equipment caught fire, and twenty passengers drowned in August 1960. Similar accidents happened throughout Hubei.<sup>18</sup> In Tianshui, Gansu, more than a hundred people, most of them students, died in two separate incidents in less than a month in the winter of 1961–2. The ferries across the Wei River were three times over the passenger limit.<sup>19</sup> Buses were just as congested. On those in Guangzhou, people were crammed ‘like pigs’, and breakdowns were so common that crowds of waiting passengers slept for days on end outside the station. Fatal accidents were common.<sup>20</sup>

Train disasters were less frequent, but as famine worsened railway wagons too became conveyors of death. In January 1961 passengers were marooned in the middle of the frozen countryside of Gansu, suffering delays of up to thirty hours as engines broke down or ran out of fuel. No food or water was provided on board, urine and excrement spread through the carriages, and the corpses of starved travellers rapidly accumulated. As the railway system clogged up, unruly crowds were also left stranded at railway stations. In Lanzhou, up to 10,000 people were put up in temporary accommodation because of the huge delays. The station itself was packed with thousands of waiting travellers without adequate provisions. Several died each day.<sup>21</sup>

For each accidental death several people barely escaped with their lives. But in the midst of the famine, even a minor injury could spell doom. Workers rarely received compensation for an industrial accident, and were often ruined by medical expenses or sacked from their jobs. In the countryside food could be used as a weapon by rapacious cadres. Absence from work, even for a medical reason, was met with a reduced food ration. Infections, malnutrition or partial invalidity reinforced each other, putting sick people at a disadvantage in the



struggle for survival and all too often dragging them down in a vicious circle of want.

# DON'T USE "V" Sign it's satanic!

And he shall make all, both little and great, rich and poor, freemen and bondment, to have a character in their RIGHT HAND or on their foreheads-Apocalypse 13:16



THE HAND OF ILLUMINATION — THE DIVINE HAND ;

The Shadow of which is Error and Impurity — The Devil.

This is the two sided god, Janus, the androgyne god Bahphomet the forces of light and shadow like the Judaeo-Masonic chess checkerboard you see everywhere. The other major ones are the "OK" 666 hand, the devil horns hand aka Baphomet and the "spock" hand which is for "shin" of the Hebrew alphabet with the 3 Vau Hebrew letters each worth a "6" aka 666.

And the third angel followed them saying with a loud voice: if any man receive his character in his forehead or in his hand, he shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God-Apocalypse 14:9

Also means 5 for 5 pointed star, pentagram (military, grunts, masonic dupes, programmed assassins delta wave) works at the direction of the hexagram(financiers, pharisees, elite, lion of judah/britain).

## Disease

Not all people who die in times of famine die of hunger. Common illnesses such as diarrhoea, dysentery, fever and typhus claim many lives first. The precise impact of each disease in China at this time is extremely difficult to ascertain, not only because of the size of the country and the diversity of conditions on the ground, but also because some of the most problematic archives happen to belong to the health services. In a climate of fear in which millions of party members were purged or labelled as rightists, few subjects could be more sensitive than that of disease and death. When malnourishment reached the inner recesses of power in Zhongnanhai and Li Zhisui told the Chairman that hepatitis and oedema were everywhere, Mao quipped: 'You doctors are just upsetting people by talking about disease. You're making it difficult for everybody. I just don't believe you.'<sup>1</sup>

Of course party officials continued to produce damning reports on all sorts of topics throughout the Great Leap Forward, often at great personal risk, but reliable surveys of medical conditions are hard to find. First the health services were battered by collectivisation, then they were overwhelmed by famine victims, and finally they simply collapsed. Hospitals, even in major cities, were stripped of resources, and by 1960 doctors and nurses were fighting for their own survival. In Nanjing, for instance, up to two-thirds of all nurses and doctors were sick. They were ill because the hospitals had become catalysts in the spread of disease and death. As one report indicated, flies and other vermin could 'frequently' be found in the food, causing diarrhoea among staff and patients. Even in top hospitals reserved for party members the heating had broken down, while staff wore dirty patches and rags stitched together. Few uniforms were ever laundered.<sup>2</sup> In Wuhan severe shortages were compounded by criminal neglect, as most doctors and nurses in the People's Hospitals seemed to lack what a report called a 'sense of responsibility'. They turned a profit by diluting medicine with water. They stole from patients. They beat the sick. Male doctors abused female patients. Hospital finances were a shambles.<sup>3</sup>

In these conditions, it does not come as a surprise that few if any medical experts were inclined to spend time in famished villages armed with scalpels and test tubes, trying to establish the determinants of mortality. The countryside, where most of the people died, was cut adrift. When the extent of the famine was finally recognised in the winter of 1960–1, emergency centres were set up in abandoned cow sheds or disused farms to help the starving. In Rongxian county, Sichuan, those brought in were dumped on a thin layer of straw directly on the floor. There were no blankets despite the bitter cold. The stench was overwhelming. Pitiful moans of anguish echoed through the air. Some were left without water for days on end – not to mention food or medicine. In Tongliang the living shared beds with the dead; nobody seemed to care.<sup>4</sup> In Guanxian things sometimes worked out the other way around: the living were locked up with the dead, as those in charge could not wait for some people to die. Yan Xishan, a mechanical worker suffering from epilepsy, was tied up and left to die in the morgue. Rats had already eaten the eyes and the noses of six cadavers in the room.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most striking features of the famine is the low incidence of epidemics. Typhus, also called gaol fever, hospital fever or famine fever, was mentioned, but did not seem to kill in large quantities. Transmitted in the faeces of lice or fleas, it appeared in crowded, unsanitary conditions, and was associated with famine, war and cold weather. It was common in detention centres for migrants fleeing the countryside, even in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>6</sup> Some 10–15 per cent of victims could succumb to typhus, typhoid and relapsing fever in times of famine, but this may not have been the case in China. Could the widespread use of DDT, efficient in pest control, have helped? This is not likely, given that other insects survived the onslaught of the country's war against nature. As we have seen, locusts actually thrived in a distressed landscape, as did other pests. The rat population, which carried the flea, was culled by the campaigns of eradication launched at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward. But rats breed ferociously fast and are not fussy feeders.

A more convincing reason why typhus, with its rash and high fever ending in delirium, may not have been widespread is that epidemics were rapidly isolated. Here was a military regime which openly denied the existence of famine yet pounced on suspected outbreaks of infectious diseases. This happened, for instance, in



the case of cholera, which appeared in Guangdong in the summer of 1961. The epidemic started in early June when several fishermen fell ill after eating contaminated seafood. Within a matter of weeks thousands more were infected, and soon well over a hundred people were dying of the disease. The local authorities used the army to impose a cordon sanitaire around the affected region. While the quarantine could not prevent cholera from spreading as far as Jiangmen and Zhongshan – panic even broke out in Yangjiang – the overall number of casualties remained low.<sup>7</sup> Plague, too, spread to an area the size of a province in March 1960 but seems to have been contained.<sup>8</sup>

But other major epidemics that historians have come to associate with famine are also noticeable for their absence from the archives. There were higher incidences of smallpox, dysentery and cholera, but there is little archival evidence, so far, of millions being swept away by major epidemics. And the official gazetteers published decades after the famine by local party committees do not mention them frequently either. On the contrary, where disease is mentioned the set sentence is invariably that 'deaths by oedema caused by inadequate nutrition were high'.<sup>9</sup>

The picture which emerges from the record is that of a country in the grip of a whole variety of diseases, rather than suffering from the impact of two or three epidemics historically associated with famine alone. And this wide-ranging increase was as much due to the destructive effects of collectivisation on virtually every aspect of daily life, from crowded kindergartens, filthy canteens and hazardous workshops to under-equipped, overcrowded and understaffed hospitals, as it was a consequence of widespread starvation per se. In Hunan some 7,500 children died of measles in 1958, twice as many as in the previous year, as families were forced to leave their offspring in congested kindergartens. Cases of polio were fifteen times higher in 1959 than in 1958. The incidence of meningitis doubled, attributable, again, to disastrous conditions in boarding kindergartens.<sup>10</sup> Snippets of information from other regions confirm this trend. Thousands of cases of meningitis, for instance, also appeared in Nanjing in the winter of 1958–9, claiming 140 lives.<sup>11</sup> The rate of diphtheria also increased hugely, causing seven times more deaths in Nanjing in 1959 than in the previous year.<sup>12</sup>

Hepatitis soared, but tended to affect privileged city residents rather than the impoverished masses in the countryside. In the cities of Hubei one in five suffered from the disease in 1961. In Wuhan alone some 270,000 out of 900,000 people tested positive.<sup>13</sup> In Shanghai too the number of infections was high enough to prompt some state enterprises to request special medical facilities to treat the illness.<sup>14</sup>

Malaria was endemic. In the summer of 1960 up to a quarter of all villagers in parts of Wuxi suffered from the disease.<sup>15</sup> Snail fever, or schistosomiasis, caused by a parasitic worm that attacks the blood and liver, was prevalent. There were thousands of cases in many a county in Hubei, where people came into contact with freshwater snails when wading barefoot through irrigated rice fields or when they went fishing. In Hanyang, hungry factory workers descended upon the many lakes surrounding the city to cut barley in the summer of 1961. Three thousand people were infected, a dozen died.<sup>16</sup> Hookworm, which sucks blood so voraciously that it leads to anaemia in the host, was common, even though reliable statistics remain elusive. But the problem was serious enough for the health authorities in Hunan to set a target of curing 3 million infected people in 1960 – in a mere eight counties.<sup>17</sup>

Everywhere the effects of collectivisation led to higher rates of illness. We have seen how people died from the heat of the backyard furnaces during the iron and steel campaign in 1958, but in the following years heatstroke continued to claim lives. Malnourished and exhausted workers were exposed to high temperatures all day long, and in Nanjing dozens of cases of heatstroke, several fatal, occurred in just two days in the summer of 1959.<sup>18</sup> In Hubei even simple straw hats were lacking, but cultivators were compelled to work at noon in the blazing sun. Thousands suffered from the heat, some thirty cases being fatal.<sup>19</sup>

Even leprosy was on the increase. Caused by a bacterium that leaves permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes, it spread because of inadequate care, contaminated water and insufficient diet. Hospitals were creaking under the workload, turning away leprosy patients. In Nanjing some 250 cases were hospitalised, but lack of resources meant that they could not be segregated from other patients.<sup>20</sup> Well over 2,000 lepers were known to exist in Wuhan, but a severe shortage of hospital beds condemned them to roam the city, scavenging for food.<sup>21</sup> Lepers in the countryside could be less fortunate. In Qigong commune, Guangdong, a sixteen-year-old boy and an adult, both suffering from leprosy, were escorted up into the mountains and shot in the back of the head.<sup>22</sup>

Mental illness, however difficult to define, was widespread, no doubt because the incessant depredations of the state combined with widespread loss, pain and grief to drive famished people to insanity. Few meaningful

studies were produced, but one Huazhou commune in Guangdong claimed that more than 500 villagers suffered from mental illness in 1959.<sup>23</sup> In one curious case of mass hysteria, a third of some 600 students in a middle school in Rui'an county, Zhejiang, started crying and laughing without apparent reason in May 1960.<sup>24</sup> Similar reports came from Sichuan, where hundreds of villagers in several counties went berserk, talking gibberish and bursting out in convulsive laughter.<sup>25</sup> One estimate placed the national rate of mental illness at one per thousand, but as the case of Huazhou shows many more people must have been unable to cope with the sheer violence of collectivisation and the horror of famine (that much is clear from very high rates of suicide, as we shall see in the next chapter). In any event, few were ever cared for, as the medical authorities had other priorities. In Wuhan, for instance, some 2,000 known cases had no access to specialist care, as a mere thirty beds were available for psychotic cases in the entire city.<sup>26</sup>

Even when they were badly treated, the mad had one advantage: like the court jester, they got away with telling the truth. As one survivor from the Xinyang region remembers, only one man dared to mention the famine in his village, walking around all day in a craze, repeating to all and sundry a popular jingle: 'man eats man, dog eat dog, even rats are so hungry that they nibble away at stones'. Nobody ever bothered him.<sup>27</sup>

Major epidemics usually associated with famine did not afflict the countryside in China. Instead the destructive effects of collectivisation increased a whole range of illnesses, including poisoning, as people took to famine foods. Some could be quite nutritious – edible kelp eaten in Ireland during the potato famine of 1846–8, or tulip bulbs in the Netherlands during the hunger winter of 1944–5 – but many led to digestive diseases.

Even before people started scrounging for edible roots and wild herbs, digestive problems could appear, caused by severe imbalances in diet. Urban residents were sometimes given a much higher proportion of pickles, salted vegetables and fermented bean curd as substitutes for fresh greens. In Nanjing, for instance, many factory workers had a salt intake of thirty to fifty grams a day, almost ten times the amount that would be recommended today. They added soy sauce to hot water to break a monotonous diet. In one case a man was found to have ingested some five litres of soy sauce in less than a month.<sup>28</sup> But large amounts of leafy vegetables without sufficient carbohydrates also caused ill-health. When grain rations ran out by the end of the month and hungry people resorted to fresh produce instead, their skin would sometimes turn purple and they died, victims of phosphite poisoning. Dozens of fatal cases were reported in the countryside around Shanghai in 1961.<sup>29</sup>

Poor hygiene in the food industry caused diarrhoea outbreaks that claimed the weak and vulnerable. The chaos sown by collectivisation was felt at every level of the food-supply chain, as the state took command of production, storage, processing, distribution and catering. Food became just another output figure to be massaged, twisted and faked by factory bosses, while apathy, neglect and sabotage were common among workers. In Wuhan food poisoning was frequent in the summer of 1959, with hundreds of incidents being recorded every couple of days. Heat in the sweltering summer played a part, but a detailed investigation of six food producers identified widespread neglect as the main culprit. Flies were everywhere: one zealous inspector counted about twenty insects per square metre. Jugs and vats destined for the market had broken seals, their contents wriggling with worms. In one factory maggots were found in 40 tonnes of jam and maltose. Rotten eggs made their way into cakes and candies. There was no water on many of the premises, so workers did not wash their hands; some urinated on the floor. Once the foodstuffs reached the market, they rotted away in humid weather.<sup>30</sup>

A further problem was that many of the ingredients no longer came from the suburbs but were shipped over long distances instead. A batch of carrots from Zhejiang province, for instance, had rotted during transportation to Wuhan. And then the human and material tools for handling food were grossly inadequate. The pedlars who previously reached every corner of the market with fresh produce had been absorbed into a lumbering collective, while a sixth of all vegetables rotted in the streets simply because there were not enough bamboo baskets to distribute them.<sup>31</sup>

In the canteens the situation was no better. Flies were found in the food, while even basic utensils were missing. In one case 300 workers had to share thirty pairs of chopsticks during breakfast, which were rapidly rinsed in a washbasin filled with dirty water. Restaurants offered no escape from the cycle of neglect. The kitchens were described as chaotic, governed by flies rather than by people. When the flies were swatted they dropped into the food. In one eating place the vegetables were served covered in dirt. Insects were found in the

vinegar and soy sauce containers.<sup>32</sup>

These examples are all from the cities – where people were relatively privileged in comparison to the abysmal conditions in the countryside. Since all the food was concentrated in large canteens, entire villages were affected by outbreaks of diarrhoea or food poisoning. In Jintang county, Sichuan, the thin gruel served to the 200 farmers in one canteen contained dozens of maggots. The reason was that the well used by the canteen was adjacent to a toilet, and drainage was poorly divided, in particular after heavy rain. Those who refused to eat the gruel went without any food for three days. The few who managed to down the concoction suffered from severe stomach pain. Dozens were taken ill. Ten died.<sup>33</sup> Four vats with human excrement and urine, their contents spilling on to the floor, were found in a kitchen in Pengxian county. The water used to wash the food and dishes came from a stagnant pond by the doorstep. A quarter of the villagers were sick. Flies lorded it over people.<sup>34</sup> In Jinyang, also in Sichuan, 'chicken excrement is everywhere, human faeces have piled up, ditches are blocked and the stench is overwhelming': local people referred to the canteen as 'shit alley'.<sup>35</sup> Even when there was food, canteens could run out of fuel or water. In Chengdu, where several branches of the Yangzi merged, some of the cooks had to travel half a mile to find water, and the grain was sometimes served raw.<sup>36</sup> But in many cases, of course, the canteens did not operate at all. After they had run out of food and fuel, the doors were closed and villagers had to fend for themselves.

Collectivisation was chequered with accidents, as we have seen in the last chapter. People were not only given contaminated products or tainted food, they also fell victim to poisoning accidents. In less than a month in 1960 some 134 fatal cases were reported to the Ministry of Hygiene, although this was a pale reflection of the reality on the ground. Pesticides were sometimes stored in canteens and granaries, while the tools used to prepare food or handle chemicals were not always kept apart. In Baodi county, Hebei, a roller contaminated with pesticides was used to mill the grain, and over a hundred villagers were poisoned. Nothing was done, the flour was sold a few days later, and another 150 people fell ill. In Wenshui, Shanxi, a pot used for poison found its way into the kitchen of a kindergarten, where more than thirty children ended up with severe intestinal pains. In Hubei fertiliser balls were mistaken for bean cakes. A thousand people fell ill, and thirty-eight died.<sup>37</sup>

As food ran out, the government started promoting new food technologies and substitute foods. Most of these were quite harmless. The 'double-steam method', heralded as a 'great revolution in cooking technology', enjoined cooks to steam the rice twice, adding water each time to bulk up the food.<sup>38</sup> Some of the substitute foods consisted merely of ground corncobs, corn stalks or the chaff from soybeans and other grains. But the government also introduced new ersatz foods. Chlorella was heralded in the early 1950s by food experts around the world as a miracle form of algae that could convert twenty times more solar energy into protein than other plants. But the plankton soup that promised to pull millions out of hunger turned out to be impossible to produce and so vile to the palate that the craze eventually subsided. In China the watery slime was elevated to the status of miracle food during the famine. It could be cultivated and skimmed from swampy ponds, but more often than not it was grown in vats of human urine, the green stuff being scooped out, washed and cooked with rice.<sup>39</sup> It probably contributed very little in terms of nutrition. Scientists discovered in the 1960s that the nutrients were encased in tough cell walls that were impossible for human digestion to break down.<sup>40</sup>

Prisoners were used as guinea pigs. Besides the green plankton, which sickened the inmates, they were also fed sawdust and wood pulp. Bao Ruowang – also known as Jean Pasqualini, the author of a memoir about life in a Chinese labour camp – remembered how brown sheets of the stuff were ground into paper pulp and mixed with flour. Mass constipation followed, killing the weaker prisoners.<sup>41</sup> But even in the cities the spread of substitute foods caused obstruction of the bowels or rupture of the sphincter. Workers at the Liangma factory in Beijing had to prise out their faeces by hand.<sup>42</sup>

Villagers scoured the forest for plants, berries and nuts. They combed the hills for edible roots and wild grasses. In desperation, they scavenged for carrion, rummaged through rubbish, scraped the bark off trees and in the end turned to mud to fill their stomachs. Even in Beijing foreigners witnessed people knocking off the leaves of acacia trees with sticks, which were then collected in bags and turned into soup.<sup>43</sup> Yan Shifu, a wiry man with a broad grin, was a young boy aged ten when the Great Leap Forward unfolded in Sichuan. He now works as a chef, and has a good memory for food. He recalls how ramie leaves were finely chopped and turned into pancakes, rape stalks were cooked into a thick stew, while mustard leaves were boiled. Pea stalks were milled, sieved and turned into small pancakes. Banana stalks were peeled and eaten raw, as if they were

sugarcane. Radish was pickled and rare enough to be seen as a treat. Insects were popped live into the mouth, but worms and toads were grilled. Despite his family's ingenuity, his father and his younger sister died of starvation.<sup>44</sup>

Some of the grasses, mushrooms and roots foraged by villagers were toxic. Few people actually knew what they were eating, as children were often the ones in charge of slipping out at night and foraging for wild herbs. 'In those days,' one survivor reminisced, 'it was not possible to go out to look for known herbal remedies. We ate everything. We ate any plant that was green. We did not care, as long as we knew that the plant was not poisonous. We ate almost anything.'<sup>45</sup> But accidents were common. In Hebei about a hundred deaths caused by contaminated food, diseased animals and toxic roots and herbs were reported each month.<sup>46</sup> Cassava, a starchy tuber that could be milled into tapioca, is an excellent source of carbohydrates, but the leaves are highly toxic and cannot be eaten raw. In Guangxi province some 174 people died in a single month after eating it without proper soaking and cooking. A similar number in Fujian province succumbed to a paralytic neurological disease caused by cassava – among thousands of cases of food poisoning.<sup>47</sup> Cocklebur, a weedy plant, was another hazard. The seeds were highly toxic, killing unsupervised pigs rooting for food. In humans it led to nausea and vomiting as well as twisting of the neck muscles, followed by a rapid pulse, breathing difficulties and eventually death. In ten days the toxic weed claimed 160 victims in Beijing.<sup>48</sup>

In a strange reversal of fortune, sometimes the most politically marginalised people were in a better position to survive, as they had developed coping mechanisms against starvation for many years before the Great Leap Forward. As the offspring of an 'evil landlord', Meng Xiaoli and his brother were chased from their ancestral house in Qianjiang, Hubei, immediately after the communist takeover in 1949. He was not given the time to gather any belongings. Though he was only a young boy, his jumper was torn from his back. They wandered about the village with their mother, ostracised by all, and ended up by the lakeside digging for wild vegetables. They slept on dried straw with the village dogs on their first night, and were later allocated a shabby mud hut. At first they tried to beg but nobody dared to give them any food. 'So we tried to catch fish from the lake but couldn't catch enough to eat because we didn't have the right tools. But we still managed to survive because we could dig up lotus roots and pick up seeds. After a few months, my brother and I learned how to catch fish from the lake. Although we didn't have any rice, in fact we could eat quite well.' When the famine engulfed the village years later, the family was the only one to be prepared for survival.<sup>49</sup>

Straw and stalks were eaten from roofs. Zhao Xiaobai, the orphan girl aged eleven who had to work like an adult to look after her little sister, remembered how one day, tortured by hunger, she climbed up a ladder on to the roof. 'I was still quite young then. I was very hungry, so I broke a piece of maize stalk [used to cover the roof] and began to chew it. It tasted delicious! I chewed one piece after another. I was so hungry that even maize stalks tasted good.'<sup>50</sup> Leather was softened and eaten. Explained Zhu Erge, who witnessed half his village die of hunger in Sichuan but managed to survive because his mother was a cook in the canteen: 'We soaked the leather chairs people used to sit on. After they were soaked, we cooked the leather and cut it into small pieces to eat.'<sup>51</sup>

Infected animals were eaten by the famished, even in the outskirts of the capital. In Huairou county, lambs contaminated with anthrax were regularly devoured by starved villagers.<sup>52</sup> Hundreds were poisoned after eating bits of smelly fat mixed with clumps of hair, scraped off animal hides by a Chengdu leather factory, which were bartered for vegetables with a people's canteen. Even the contaminated carcasses of diseased livestock, culled by a slaughterhouse in Guanxian county, were quietly sold to a local commune.<sup>53</sup> When people were not eaten by rats, rats were eaten by people, dead ones sometimes being fished out of cesspits.<sup>54</sup>

When nothing else was left, people turned to a soft mud called Guanyin soil – named after the Goddess of Mercy. A work team sent by Li Jingquan was taken aback by what they saw in Liangxian county, Sichuan. It was a vision of hell, as serried ranks of ghostly villagers queued up in front of deep pits, their shrivelled bodies pouring with sweat under the glare of the sun, waiting for their turn to scramble down the hole and carve out a few handfuls of the porcelain-white mud. Children, their ribs starting through the skin, fainted from exhaustion, their grimy bodies looking like mud sculptures shadowing the earth. Old women in ragged clothes burned paper charms and bowed, hands folded, mumbling strange incantations. A quarter of a million tonnes were dug out by more than 10,000 people. In one village alone 214 families out of a total of 262 had eaten mud, several kilos per person. Some of the villagers filled their mouths with mud as they were digging in the pit. But most of them added water and kneaded the soil after mixing it with chaff, flowers and weeds, baking mud cakes that were filling, even if they provided little sustenance. Once eaten the soil acted like cement, drying out the stomach



and absorbing all the moisture inside the intestinal tract. Defecation became impossible. In every village several people died a painful death, their colons blocked up with soil.<sup>55</sup> In Henan, as He Guanghai recollected, so many people took to eating a local stone called yanglishi, which was ground and turned into cakes, that adults would help each other prise out their faeces with twigs.<sup>56</sup> All over China, from Sichuan, Gansu and Anhui to Henan, people tormented by ravaging hunger turned to mud.

People really did die of starvation – in contrast to many other famines where disease loomed large on the horizon of death. Starvation, in a strict clinical sense, means that the attrition of protein and fatty deposits in the body causes the muscles to waste away and eventually stop functioning, including the heart. Adults can survive for weeks without food, as long as they can drink water. The fat stored in the body provides the main source of energy and is broken down first. A small amount of calories are also stashed away in the liver as glycogen, which is generally converted within a day. But as soon as the fatty deposits have been exhausted, proteins are stripped from muscles and other tissues and used by the liver to produce sugars needed by the brain – the body's first priority. The brain quite literally starts cannibalising the body, taking bits of this or that tissue to come up with the glucose it needs to survive. Blood pressure lowers, which means that the heart has to work harder. The body weakens and progressively becomes emaciated. As proteins are depleted, fluids start leaking out of the blood vessels and from disintegrating tissues, accumulating beneath the skin and in cavities around the body, producing oedema. The swelling first appears in the face, the feet and the legs, but fluids can also gravitate around the stomach and chest. Swollen knees make walking painful. Taking extra salt or watering down a meal to make it last longer only worsens the condition. But some of the starving do not suffer from oedema and dehydrate instead, their skin turning to parchment, shrivelled and scaly, sometimes covered with brown spots. As the throat muscles weaken and the larynx dries up, the voice grows hoarse before falling silent. People tend to curl up to save energy. The lungs weaken. The face caves in, cheekbones stand out and bulging eyeballs are a gruesome white, staring vacantly and seemingly without emotion. The ribs poke through the skin, which hangs in folds. Arms and legs look like twigs. Black hair loses its colour and falls out. The heart has to work harder still, as the volume of blood actually increases relative to a declining body weight. In the end the organs are so damaged that they fail.<sup>57</sup>

Starvation may have been a taboo topic, but the archives are replete with reports about oedema (shuizhongbing) and death by starvation (esi). Wu Ningkun, a professor of English literature, described what happened as he went through hunger: 'I was the first to come down with a serious case of oedema. I became emaciated, my ankles swelled, and my legs got so weak that I often fell while walking to the fields for forced labor. I did not know what I looked like, as there were no mirrors around, but I could tell from the ghastly looks of the other inmates that I must have been quite a sight.'<sup>58</sup> Few victims were as eloquent, but the symptoms were observed everywhere. In a commune in Qingyuan – once considered Guangdong's granary – 40 per cent of the villagers suffered from oedema in 1960.<sup>59</sup> Even in cities it was common. We have already seen how half the workforce suffered from oedema in Beijing. Among high school students in Shanghai oedema spread in 1960–1.<sup>60</sup> In Nankai University, Tianjin's top institution of higher learning, one in five suffered from oedema.<sup>61</sup> So common was the disease that when the famished did not develop it, an explanation was warranted. Hu Kaiming, an outspoken official appointed as the first secretary of Zhangjiakou in 1959, observed how in the winter of 1960–1 starving villagers would suddenly drop dead as a consequence of low blood sugar, without the usual signs of oedema.<sup>62</sup>

Why did villagers not succumb to epidemics in much greater numbers before terminal starvation set in? One reason, suggested above, is that the party closely monitored infectious diseases. But collectivisation also brought about organisational chaos and the collapse of rural health care, which was rudimentary in the best of cases. A more plausible explanation is that people in the countryside starved to death much more quickly than elsewhere, reducing the window of opportunity during which germs could prey on a lowered immunity. The only available food was in the collective canteens, and access to these was controlled by local cadres. Under immense pressure to come up with tangible results, many local officials used food as a weapon. As we shall see in the chapter on violence, villagers who did not work were not given any food. And those who could no longer work were often exhausted. Death followed promptly.

## The Gulag

Shen Shanqing, a fifty-four-year-old man working on a collective farm in Shanghai, made a fatal mistake on a summer's day in 1958. Rather than adding water to manure to reduce the solids, he poured the undiluted fertiliser directly over a row of carrots. The leaves wilted. Shen was obviously more interested in collecting work points than in selfless devotion to the Great Leap Forward in agriculture. And he was brazen as well. Rather than show contrition after his arrest, he defiantly claimed that food was scarce and prison would at least provide him with bed and board. Closer scrutiny revealed that he had also slandered the party two years earlier. He was promptly packed off to a labour camp for ten years in the windswept plains of Qinghai, 2,000 kilometres to the north-east of Shanghai. His file shows that he was released in September 1968, a sick and broken man willing to write the most demeaning confessions, from his 'deliberate act of sabotage' ten years earlier to what appeared to be his biggest infraction during a decade of forced labour, namely the accidental breaking of 'government property' in the form of a pane of glass.<sup>1</sup>

His sentence was severe, but many ordinary people faced a spell of one to five years in a camp for the slightest misdemeanour. Most of the evidence is securely locked away in the closed archives belonging to the public security bureaus, but reports on crime and punishment were occasionally copied to other party organs, for instance a document detailing that even petty thieves in Nanjing were sentenced to terms ranging from five to ten years in the summer of 1959.<sup>2</sup> In Beijing an internal prison registry with details of 400 male prisoners shows that a sentence of five to ten years for a minor offence was nothing out of the ordinary. Ding Baozhen, a farmer who had joined the People's Liberation Army in 1945 and was demobilised a decade later, pilfered two pairs of trousers worth a grand total of seventeen yuan. He was jailed for twelve years on 11 February 1958. Chen Zhiwen, an illiterate villager who stole from travellers at the Qianmen bus station in the capital, was given fifteen years. Another pauper who eked out a living as a cowherd before making his way to the capital in 1957 was found thieving in front of the Beijing Department Store: he too was locked away for fifteen years.<sup>3</sup>

But fewer people were shot than in the previous years – at least after 1958. The policy was to 'arrest fewer, kill fewer, and supervise fewer', Xie Fuzhi, minister of public security, explained to his staff in April 1960. Death by execution, like everything else in the planned economy, was a figure, a target to be fulfilled, a table of statistics in which the numbers had to add up: 4,000 should be killed in 1960, he announced. This was lower than the previous year. In 1959 some 4,500 people were killed (the term was always kill, sha, for communist regimes rarely felt the need to disguise judicial killing with euphemisms such as 'death penalty' or 'capital punishment'), while 213,000 people were arrested and a further 677,000 were humiliated in public.<sup>4</sup>

None of these sensitive data are easy to come by, but a public security document from Hebei shows how this worked out at the provincial level. In the province surrounding the capital some 16,000 'counter-revolutionaries' were arrested in 1958, three times more than in the preceding two years, as well as 20,000 common criminals, the highest figure since 1949 with the exception of 1955. These numbers dropped drastically in 1959, which saw the authorities apprehend 1,900 'counter-revolutionaries' and 5,000 common criminals. Little changed in 1960 and 1961, except that the number of common criminals went down to just over 1,000.<sup>5</sup> About 800 were shot in 1959.<sup>6</sup>

Few may have been killed, but even a short stint in a labour camp could spell disease and death. A constellation of labour camps stretched across the country's most inhospitable regions, from the 'great northern wilderness', as the vast swampy expanses of Heilongjiang were called, to the arid mountains and deserts of Qinghai and Gansu in the north-west. Life was miserable if not tenuous outside the gulag system, but inside the salt and uranium mines, the brick factories, the state farms and labour camps a brutal regime combined with widespread starvation to bury one out of every four or five inmates. In Huangshui, Sichuan, more than a third of all inmates starved to death.<sup>7</sup> In Jiabiangou, a sand dune area near the Gobi Desert in Gansu, the first batch of 2,300 prisoners arrived in December 1957. By the time the inmates were moved to another farm in September 1960, a thousand had died in abject conditions. This was followed by a further 640 deaths in November and December, when the camp was finally closed down in the wake of Zhang Zhongliang's fall from power.<sup>8</sup> Overall,

in the entire province, some 82,000 prisoners worked in a hundred reform-through-labour camps in June 1960.<sup>9</sup> By December 1960 only 72,000 prisoners remained, close to 4,000 having died that month alone.<sup>10</sup> The lowest annual death rates in labour camps recorded in the archives consulted for this book were 4 to 8 per cent a year from 1959 to 1961 in Hebei, which held only a few thousand prisoners.<sup>11</sup>

How large was the population in the laogai, or reform-through-labour camps? Xie Fuzhi put the total – excluding Tibet – at 1.8 million in 1960. Prisoners worked in 1,077 factories, mines and quarries, as well as on 440 farms.<sup>12</sup> A rough death rate of 5 per cent in 1958 and 1962 and 10 per cent a year from 1959 to 1961 would amount to 700,000 deaths from disease and starvation. No wonder some wished to escape. But overall surveillance was tight, if only because the labour camps made a crucial contribution to the national economy – estimated by Xie Fuzhi in 1960 at 3 billion yuan per annum, not counting the 750,000 tonnes of produce from farms.<sup>13</sup>

Reform-through-labour camps were only one part of a much larger gulag system. People who were subjected to struggle sessions or put under formal surveillance – just under a million in 1959 – were all too often dispatched to a local prison.<sup>14</sup> And, more importantly, from 1957 to 1962 formal justice was curtailed. This started, as always, at the top, in the person of Mao Zedong. In August 1958 he pronounced that 'Every one of our party resolutions is a law. When we have a conference it becomes the law . . . The great majority of rules and regulations (90 per cent) are drafted by the judicial administration. We should not rely on these, we should rely mainly on resolutions and conferences, four [conferences] a year instead of common law and criminal law to keep order.'<sup>15</sup>

The Chairman's word was law indeed, as party committees – 'with the help of the masses' – took charge of judicial matters. It was this political pressure that brought about the abolition of the Ministry of Justice in 1959. In the countryside this meant that power shifted from the judicial authorities towards the local militias. In the entire county of Ningjin, Hebei, with a population of 830,000 people, a mere eighty cadres were in charge of the police, the inspectorate and the courts. This was half as many as in the days prior to the advent of the people's communes.<sup>16</sup>

The local militia relied on a whole new dimension added to the world of incarceration from August 1957, namely re-education-through-labour camps, called lao jiao. Common criminals like Shen Shanqing were handed a sentence by a people's tribunal, but prisoners in re-education camps were not subject to any judicial procedures and could be kept indefinitely – until fully 're-educated'. In contrast to the reform-through-labour camps, they were organised not by the Ministry of Public Security, but by provinces, cities, counties, people's communes and even villages. Anybody suspected of pilfering, vagrancy, slandering the party, daubing reactionary slogans on walls, obstructing labour or committing an act regarded as against the spirit of the Great Leap Forward could be locked away in a re-education camp. These were just as harsh as the more formal labour camps, and they sprouted up everywhere after 1957. Xie Fuzhi mentioned 440,000 prisoners in re-education camps in 1960, but what he saw from the distance of his office in Beijing was no more than the tip of an iceberg.<sup>17</sup>

It was not until work teams were sent into the countryside from late 1960 onwards to supervise a purge of local cadres that the dimensions of local incarceration finally come to light. There was hardly a collective that did not run its own private gulag, backed up by the powerful militia created in the summer of 1958. Report after report mentioned how this or that unit – local police offices, village teams, people's communes – had established a 'private punishment camp' (sili xingchang). For every criminal like Shen Shanqing formally handed over to the courts, several bypassed the judicial system and ended up in a local prison. The size of this shadow world will never be known. In the model commune of Xushui, as we have seen, Zhang Guozhong built an elaborate gulag system, extending from the county down to every brigade. It held 1.5 per cent of the local population.<sup>18</sup> In Fengxian, near Shanghai, villagers were routinely carried off to special labour camps, one of them set up specifically to lock up recalcitrant children.<sup>19</sup> In Kaiping county, one brigade alone boasted no fewer than four camps, as hundreds of people were sent away for a couple of days or longer stretches of up to 150 days. Once inside the camps many were beaten and tortured; some were crippled for life.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes people were not even locked up in a formal prison. To set an example, a cadre in Kaiping chained up a grandmother accused of theft for ten days in the canteen using 4.5-kilo fetters. A young militiaman struck matches to burn her feet.<sup>21</sup>



Special camps and special sanctions were devised throughout the country, as local justice was allowed to run rampant. In Yinjiang county, Guizhou, the inmates of one camp had the character for 'thief' imprinted on their forehead in red ink. Throughout the province, people's communes set up 'training centres' (jixundui) where those who expressed critical views or refused to attend meetings were sent for 're-education' and compelled to undertake hard labour.<sup>22</sup> Several 'training camps' were also established by the Public Security Bureau in Liuzhou in 1959, to take care of subversive elements who objected to collectivisation.<sup>23</sup> In Yanqing county, north of Beijing, the merest suspicion of slacking resulted in detention: a sixty-two-year-old man spent a month in confinement for not having caught enough sparrows.<sup>24</sup>

If for every criminal handed over to the formal justice system some three or four people were locked away in a local re-education camp, the total prisoner population would have reached 8 to 9 million in any one year during the Great Leap Forward (1.8 to 2 million in labour camps, 6 to 8 million in re-education camps). The total number of deaths due to disease and starvation, conservatively estimated earlier at about a million in formal labour camps, would have to be multiplied by three or four, meaning that at least 3 million died in the gulag during the famine.<sup>25</sup> The death rate was high, but compared to the Soviet Union in the 1930s the incarceration rate was relatively low. This is because comparatively few people actually did time for crime. They were beaten and starved instead.



## Violence

Terror and violence were the foundations of the regime. Terror, to be effective, had to be arbitrary and ruthless. It had to be widespread enough to reach everyone but did not have to claim many lives. This principle was well understood. 'Kill a chicken to scare the monkey' was a traditional saying. Cadres who forced villagers in Tongzhou – just outside the capital – to kneel before beating them called it 'punish one to deter a hundred'.<sup>1</sup>

However, during the Great Leap Forward something of an altogether different nature happened in the countryside. Violence became a routine tool of control. It was not used occasionally on a few to instil fear in the many, rather it was directed systematically and habitually against anybody seen to dawdle, obstruct or protest, let alone pilfer or steal – a majority of villagers. Every meaningful incentive to work was destroyed for the cultivator – the land belonged to the state, the grain he produced was procured at a price that was often below cost of production, his livestock, tools and utensils were no longer his, often even his home was confiscated. The local cadre, on the other hand, faced ever greater pressure to fulfil and overfulfil the plan, having to whip up the workforce in one relentless drive after another.

The constant hammering of propaganda may have helped in the early days of the Great Leap Forward, but the daily meetings villagers were required to attend contributed to widespread sleep deprivation. 'Meetings every day, loudspeakers everywhere,' remembered Li Popo when interviewed about the famine in Sichuan.<sup>2</sup> Meetings, some of them lasting several days, were indeed at the heart of collectivisation, but they were not so much a forum of socialist democracy, where the peasant masses openly voiced their views, as a site of intimidation where cadres could lecture, bully, threaten and shout themselves hoarse for hours on end. All too often farmers were woken in the middle of the night to work in the fields after an evening at a village meeting, so that they slept for less than three or four hours a day in the ploughing season.<sup>3</sup>

In any event, as the promise of utopia was followed by yet another spell of back-breaking labour, the willingness to trade hard work for empty promises gradually eroded. Soon, the only way to extract compliance from an exhausted workforce was the threat of violence. Nothing short of fear of hunger, pain or death seemed to be able to galvanise them. In some places both villagers and cadres became so brutalised that the scope and degree of coercion had to be constantly expanded, creating a mounting spiral of violence. With far fewer carrots to offer, the party relied more heavily on the stick.

The stick was the weapon of choice in the countryside. It was cheap and versatile. A swing of the baton would punish a straggler, while a series of blows could lacerate the back of more stubborn elements. In serious cases victims could be strung up and beaten black and blue. People were forced to kneel on broken shells and beaten. This happened, for instance, to Chen Wuxiong, who refused to work on an irrigation project far away from home. He was forced to kneel and hold a heavy log above his head, all the while being beaten with a stick by local cadre Chen Longxiang.<sup>4</sup> As famished villagers often suffered from oedema, liquid seeped through their pores with every stroke of the stick. It was a common expression that someone 'was beaten until all the water came out', for instance in the case of Lu Jingfu, a farmer chased by a team of thugs. So enraged was their leader Ren Zhongguang, first party secretary of Napeng commune, Qin county, that he beat the man for twenty minutes.<sup>5</sup>

Party officials often took a lead. The report compiled by the local party committee which investigated abuses in a commune in Qingyuan explained that the first party secretary Deng Zhongxing personally beat more than 200 farmers, killing fourteen in an attempt to fulfil the quotas.<sup>6</sup> The brains of Liu Shengmao, too sick to work at the reservoir in Huaminglou, Hunan, were widely spattered by the beating he received from the brigade secretary, who continued to pummel his lifeless body in a blind fury.<sup>7</sup> Ou Desheng, party secretary of a commune in Hunan, single-handedly punched 150 people, of whom four died. 'If you want to be a party member you must know how to beat people' was his advice to new recruits.<sup>8</sup> In Daoxian county – 'everywhere is a torture field', an investigation team wrote – farmers were clubbed on a regular basis. One team leader personally beat thirteen people to death (a further nine subsequently died of their injuries).<sup>9</sup> Some of these cadres were veritable gangsters, their mere appearance instilling fear. In Nanhai county, brigade leader Liang

Yanlong toted three guns and stalked the village in a big leather coat.<sup>10</sup> Li Xianchun, team leader in Hebei, injected himself with morphine daily and would swagger about the village in bright red trousers, swearing loudly and randomly beating anybody who had the misfortune to catch his attention.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, across the country, maybe as many as half of all cadres regularly pummelled or caned the people they were meant to serve – as endless reports demonstrate. Four thousand out of 16,000 villagers working on the Huangcai reservoir in Hunan in the winter of 1959–60 were kicked and beaten, and 400 died as a result.<sup>12</sup> In a Luoding commune in Guangdong, more than half of all cadres beat the villagers, close to a hundred being clubbed to death.<sup>13</sup> A more comprehensive investigation of Xinyang, Henan, showed that over a million people died in 1960. Most died of starvation, but some 67,000 were beaten to death by the militias.<sup>14</sup>

The stick was common, but it was only one tool in the arsenal of horror devised by local cadres to demean and torture those who failed to keep up. As the countryside slid into starvation, ever greater violence had to be inflicted on the famished to get them into the fields. The ingenuity deployed by the few to inflict pain and suffering on the many seemed boundless. People were thrown into ponds, sometimes bound, sometimes stripped of their clothes. In Luoding a ten-year-old boy was tied up and thrown into a bog for having stolen a few stalks of wheat. He died after a few days.<sup>15</sup>

People were stripped naked and left in the cold. For stealing a kilo of beans, farmer Zhu Yufa was fined 120 yuan. His clothes, his blanket and his floor mat were confiscated, then he was stripped naked and subjected to a struggle session.<sup>16</sup> In one commune in Guangdong, where thousands of farmers were sent to do forced labour, stragglers were stripped of their clothes in the middle of the winter.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, in the rush to complete a reservoir, up to 400 villagers at a time were made to work in sub-zero temperatures without cotton-padded clothing. No exceptions were made for pregnant women. The cold, it was thought, would force the villagers to work more vigorously.<sup>18</sup> In Liuyang, Hunan, a team of 300 men and women were made to work bare-chested in the snow. One in seven died.<sup>19</sup>

And then, in the summer, people were forced to stand in the glaring sun with arms spread out (others had to kneel on stones or on broken glass). This happened from Sichuan in the south to Liaoning in the north.<sup>20</sup> People were also burned with incandescent tools. Hot needles were used to singe navels.<sup>21</sup> When farmers recruited to work on a reservoir in Lingbei commune complained about pain, the militia seared their bodies.<sup>22</sup> In Hebei people were branded with a hot iron.<sup>23</sup> In Sichuan a few were doused in petrol and set alight, some burning to death.<sup>24</sup>

Boiling water was poured over people. As fuel was scarce, it was more common to cover people in urine and excrement.<sup>25</sup> One eighty-year-old woman, who had the temerity to report her team leader for stealing rice, paid the price when she was drenched in urine.<sup>26</sup> In Longgui commune, near Shantou, those who failed to keep up with work were pushed into a heap of excrement, forced to drink urine or had their hands burned.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, a runny concoction of excrement diluted with water was poured down a victim's throat. Huang Bingyin, a villager weakened by starvation, stole a chicken but was caught and forced by the village leader to swallow cow dung.<sup>28</sup> Liu Desheng, guilty of poaching a sweet potato, was covered in urine. He, his wife and his son were also forced into a heap of excrement. Then tongs were used to prise his mouth open after he refused to swallow excrement. He died three weeks later.<sup>29</sup>

Mutilation was carried out everywhere. Hair was ripped out.<sup>30</sup> Ears and noses were lopped off. After Chen Di, a farmer in Guangdong, stole some food, he was tied up by militiaman Chen Qiu, who cut off one of his ears.<sup>31</sup> The case of Wang Ziyou was reported to the central leadership: one of his ears was chopped off, his legs were tied up with wire, a ten-kilo stone was dropped on his back and then he was branded with a hot iron – as punishment for digging up a potato.<sup>32</sup> In Yuanling county, Hunan, testicles were beaten, soles of feet were branded and noses were stuffed with hot peppers. Ears were nailed against the wall.<sup>33</sup> In the Liuyang region, Hunan, iron wires were used to chain farmers.<sup>34</sup> In Jianyang, Sichuan, an iron wire was run through the ears of thieves, pulled down by the weight of a piece of cardboard which read 'habitual thief'.<sup>35</sup> Others had needles inserted under their nails.<sup>36</sup> In several parts of Guangdong, cadres injected salt water into people with needles normally used on cattle.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes husbands and wives were forced to beat each other, a few to death.<sup>38</sup> One elderly man, when interviewed for this book in 2006, quietly sobbed when he recounted how as a young boy he and the other villagers had been forced to beat a grandmother, tied up in the local temple for having taken wood from the

forest.<sup>39</sup>

People were intimidated by mock executions and mock burials.<sup>40</sup> They were also buried alive. This was often mentioned in reports about Hunan. People were locked up in a cellar and left to die in eerie silence after a period of frantic screaming and scratching against the hatch.<sup>41</sup> The practice was widespread enough to prompt a query by provincial boss Zhou Xiaozhou during a visit to Fengling county in November 1958.<sup>42</sup>

Humiliation was the trusted companion of pain. Everywhere people were paraded – sometimes with a dunce cap, sometimes with a placard on their chests, sometimes entirely naked.<sup>43</sup> Faces were smeared with black ink.<sup>44</sup> People were given yin and yang haircuts, as one half of the head was shaved, the other not.<sup>45</sup> Verbal abuse was rife. The Red Guards, ten years later during the Cultural Revolution, invented very little.

Punishment also extended to the hereafter. Sometimes the corpses of those who had been beaten to death were simply left to rot by the roadside, destined to become pariahs of the afterlife, their wandering ghosts – according to popular belief – never able to rest without proper burial rites. Signs were put up by some graves. In Longgui commune, Guangdong, where one in five died in 1959, some people were hastily buried by the roadside, the site marked by a signboard with the word 'sluggard'.<sup>46</sup> In Shimen, Hunan, the entire family of Mao Bingxiang starved to death, but the brigade leader refused to give them a burial. After a week rats had gnawed through their eyes. Local people later told an investigation team that 'we people are not even like dogs, nobody buries us when we die'.<sup>47</sup>

Family members could be punished for trying to bury a relative who had fallen foul of local justice. When a seventy-year-old mother hanged herself to escape from hunger, her child hurried back home from the fields in a panic. But the local cadre was infuriated by the breach of discipline. He chased the daughter down the road, punched her head and then, when she was down, kicked her upper body. She was crippled for life. 'You can keep her and eat her,' he said of her mother, whose body was left for days to decompose.<sup>48</sup> The worst form of desecration was to chop up the body and use it as fertiliser. This happened with Deng Daming, beaten to death because his child had stolen a few broad beans. Party secretary Dan Niming ordered his body to be simmered down into fertiliser for a field of pumpkins.<sup>49</sup>

The extent of the violence is difficult to underestimate: in a province such as Hunan, which did not rank as one of the worst in terms of overall casualties, a report by a central inspection committee addressed to Zhou Enlai at the time noted that people were beaten to death in eighty-two out of eighty-six counties and cities.<sup>50</sup> But it is harder to come up with reliable figures, and none are likely ever to be produced for the whole country. It was difficult enough for investigators at the time to determine how many people had died during the famine, let alone ascertain the cause of death. But some of the teams sent to the countryside probed further and came up with a rough idea of what had happened on the ground. In Daoxian county, Hunan, many thousands perished in 1960, but only 90 per cent of the deaths could be attributed to disease and starvation. Having reviewed all the evidence, the team concluded that 10 per cent had been buried alive, clubbed to death or otherwise killed by party members and the militia.<sup>51</sup> In Shimen county, Hunan, some 13,500 died in 1960, of whom 12 per cent were 'beaten or driven to their deaths'.<sup>52</sup> In Xinyang, a region subject to an inquiry headed by senior leaders such as Li Xiannian, a million people died in 1960. A formal investigation committee estimated that 6–7 per cent were beaten to death.<sup>53</sup> In Sichuan the rates were much higher. In Kaixian county, a close examination by a team sent by the provincial party committee at the time concluded that in Fengle commune, where 17 per cent of the population had perished in less than a year, up to 65 per cent of the victims had died because they were beaten, punished with food deprivation or forced into committing suicide.<sup>54</sup>

Report after report detailed the ways in which people were tortured, and the image that emerges from this mass of evidence is that at least 6 to 8 per cent of all the famine victims were directly killed or died as a result of injuries inflicted by cadres and the militia. As we shall see in Chapter 35, at least 45 million people perished above a normal death rate during the famine from 1958 to 1962. Given the extent and scope of violence so abundantly documented in the party archives, it is likely that at least 2.5 million of these victims were beaten or tortured to death.

There is no simple explanation for the violence that underpinned crash collectivisation. One might very well point to a tradition of violence stretching back many centuries in China, but how would that have been any different from the rest of the world? Europe was steeped in blood, and mass murder took an unprecedented number of lives in the first half of the twentieth century. Modern dictatorships can be particularly murderous in



their combination of new technologies of power, exercised through the one-party state, with new technologies of death, from the machine gun to the gas chamber. When powerful states decide to pool these resources to exterminate entire groups of people the overall consequences can be devastating. Genocide, after all, is made possible only with the advent of the modern state.

The one-party state under Mao did not concentrate all its resources on the extermination of specific groups of people – with the exception, of course, of counter-revolutionaries, saboteurs, spies and other ‘enemies of the people’, political categories vague enough potentially to include anybody and everybody. But Mao did throw the country into the Great Leap Forward, extending the military structure of the party to all of society. ‘Everyone a soldier,’ Mao had proclaimed at the height of the campaign, brushing aside such bourgeois niceties as a salary, a day off each week or a prescribed limit on the amount of labour a worker should carry out.<sup>55</sup> A giant people’s army in the command economy would respond to every beck and call of its generals. Every aspect of society was organised along military lines – with canteens, boarding kindergartens, collective dormitories, shock troops and villagers construed as the footsoldiers – in a continuous revolution. These were not merely martial terms rhetorically deployed to heighten group cohesion. All the leaders were military men attuned to the rigours of warfare. They had spent twenty years fighting a guerrilla war in extreme conditions of deprivation. They had coped with one extermination campaign after another unleashed by the nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, and then managed to survive the onslaught of the Japanese army in the Second World War. They had come through the vicious purges and bouts of torture which periodically convulsed the party itself. They glorified violence and were inured to massive loss of life. And all of them shared an ideology in which the end justified the means. In 1962, having lost millions of people in his province, Li Jingquan compared the Great Leap Forward to the Long March, in which only one in ten had made it to the end: ‘We are not weak, we are stronger, we have kept the backbone.’<sup>56</sup>

On the ground party officials showed the same callous disregard for human life as they had to the millions mobilised into the bloody offensives against Chiang Kai-shek. The brute force with which the country had been conquered was now to be unleashed on the economy – regardless of the casualty figures. And as sheer human willpower was deemed capable of just about any feat – mountains could be moved – any failure looked suspiciously like sabotage. A slacker in the ‘war on sparrows’ was a ‘bad element’ who could derail the entire military strategy of the Great Leap Forward. A farmer who pilfered from the canteen was a soldier gone astray, to be eliminated before the platoon was threatened with mutiny. Anybody was potentially a deserter, or a spy, or a traitor, so that the slightest infraction was met with the full rigour of martial justice. The country became a giant boot camp in which ordinary people no longer had a say in the tasks they were commanded to carry out, despite the pretence of socialist democracy. They had to follow orders, failing which they risked punishment. Whatever checks existed on violence – religion, law, community, family – were simply swept away.

As the party purged itself several times during the Great Leap Forward, it also recruited new members, many of them unsavoury characters who felt little compunction in using violence to get the job done. The village, commune or county with the most red flags was generally also the one with the most victims. But red flags could be taken away and given to a rival at any moment, forcing local cadres to keep up the pressure, although the workforce was increasingly exhausted. A vicious circle of repression was created, as ever more relentless beatings were required to get the starving to perform whatever tasks were assigned to them. In the escalation of violence, the limit was reached when the threat of punishment and the threat of starvation cancelled each other out. One villager forced to work long shifts up in the mountains in the cold of winter put it succinctly: ‘We are exhausted; even if you beat me I won’t work.’<sup>57</sup>

The way in which violence escalated at the time was analysed in an extremely interesting manuscript entitled ‘How and Why Cadres Beat People’, written by one of the investigation teams dispatched to the countryside in Hunan. The authors of the report not only spent time collecting incriminating evidence against cadres guilty of abuse of power, but they also interviewed them in a rare attempt to find out what had gone wrong. They discovered the reward principle: cadres beat villagers to earn praise from their superiors. However chaotic the situation was on the ground, violence always followed a line, namely from the top towards the bottom. Zhao Zhangsheng was an example. A low-ranking party member, at first he refused to hit people suspected of being ‘rightists’ in the purges following the 1959 Lushan plenum. He was taken to task by his superiors, and even risked being denounced as a ‘conservative rightist’ himself, but he continued to express reluctance at using violence against party enemies. So he was fined five yuan as a warning. Then, at long last, he succumbed to the pressure, coming back with a vengeance, bashing a small child till it was covered in blood.<sup>58</sup>

Peer pressure all too often dragged local cadres down to the same level, binding all in a shared camaraderie

of violence. In Leiyang, county leader Zhang Donghai and his acolytes considered violence to be a 'duty' intrinsic to the 'continuous revolution': 'having a campaign is not the same as doing embroidery, it is impossible not to beat people to death'. Local cadres who refused to beat slackers were themselves subjected to struggle sessions, tied up and beaten. Some 260 were dismissed from their jobs. Thirty were beaten to death.<sup>59</sup> In Hechuan county, Sichuan, cadres were told that 'There are so many people working, it doesn't matter if you beat a few to death.'<sup>60</sup>

Some of the interviews collected by party inspectors in 1961 confronted the perpetrators of violence with their victims. Shao Ke'nan was a young Hunanese who was beaten for the first time in the summer of 1958, at the height of the collectivisation frenzy. Dispatched to work for twelve hours a day in the middle of the winter on an irrigation project in the Huaguo mountains, he was covered in blows again. One of his tormentors was a cadre called Yi Shaohua. Shao knew Yi from his childhood, and recalled that the man had never resorted to violence before the Great Leap Forward. With the unfolding of new political campaigns he changed, beating and cursing on a mere whim. He punched hard, leaving his victims bruised, battered and bleeding.<sup>61</sup> When Yi Shaohua, in turn, was asked why he was so violent, he explained that the pressure had come from his superior. Yi was afraid of being labelled a rightist. His boss told him that 'if you don't beat them the work won't get done'. The pressure had to be passed along a chain of command: 'the people above us squeeze us so we squeeze the people below us'.<sup>62</sup> In other words, as party members were terrorised themselves, they in turn terrorised the population under their control.

Cadres had a choice. They could improve the living conditions of the villagers – against all odds – or instead try to meet the party's targets. The one came at the expense of the other. Most took the path of least resistance. Once that choice had been made, violence assumed its own logic. In conditions of widespread penury it was impossible to keep everybody alive. There simply was not enough food left in the village to provide even reliable farmers with an adequate diet, and in the climate of mass repression following the 1959 Lushan plenum it did not look as if the problem of shortages was about to be solved very quickly. An expedient way to increase the available food was to eliminate the weak and sick. The planned economy already reduced people to mere digits on a balance sheet, a resource to be exploited for the greater good, like coal or grain. The state was everything, the individual nothing, his worth being constantly assessed through work points and determined by the ability to move earth or plant rice. In the countryside farmers were treated like livestock: they had to be fed, clothed and housed, all of which came at a cost to the collective. The logical extension of these bleak calculations was to cull those judged unworthy of life. The discriminate killing of slackers, weaklings or otherwise unproductive elements increased the overall food supply for those who contributed to the regime through their labour. Violence was one way of dealing with food shortages.

Food was commonly used as a weapon. Hunger was the punishment of first resort, even more so than a beating. Li Wenming, deputy party secretary of a commune in Chuxiong county, clubbed six farmers to death, but his main tool for discipline was hunger. Two recalcitrant brothers were deprived of food for a full week, and they ended up desperately foraging for roots in the forest, where they soon died of hunger. One of their wives was sick at home. She too was banned from the canteen. An entire brigade of seventy-six people was punished with hunger for twelve days. Many died of starvation.<sup>63</sup> In Longgui commune, Guangdong, the party secretary of the commune ordered that those who did not work should not eat.<sup>64</sup> Describing what happened in several counties in Sichuan, one inspector noted that 'commune members too sick to work are deprived of food – it hastens their deaths'. In the first month the ration was reduced to 150 grams of grain a day, then in the following month to 100 grams. In the end those about to die were denied any food at all. In Jiangbei and Yongchuan, 'virtually every people's commune withholds food'. In one canteen catering for sixty-seven people, eighteen died within three months after they were barred from the premises on grounds of sickness.<sup>65</sup> Few reliable figures exist, but a team of inspectors who looked closely at a number of brigades in Ruijiang county, Sichuan, believed that 80 per cent of those who had died of hunger had been denied food as a form of punishment.<sup>66</sup> And even those who were given food in the canteen often received less than they were formally entitled to. As one farmer explained, the ladle that was dipped into the pot could 'read people's faces'. By this he meant a phenomenon that many interviewees recalled, namely that the man in charge of the canteen deliberately discriminated against those he considered to be 'bad elements'. Whereas the spoon reached deep to the bottom of the pot for good workers, it merely skimmed the surface for 'bad elements', who were given a

watery concoction: 'The water looked greenish and was undrinkable.'<sup>67</sup>

Report after report alleges that the sick were also forced to come out and work in the fields. Of the twenty-four villagers suffering from oedema who were compelled by cadre Zhao Xuedong to take part in labour all but four died. In Jinchang commune those who were lucky enough to be given medical treatment were driven to perform heavy labour by the local party secretary as soon as they were released from medical care.<sup>68</sup> Throughout the country those who were too ill to work were routinely cut off from the food supply – a decision easily reached by those cadres who interpreted illness as opposition to the regime. In the worst places even those who managed to accomplish their daily task were given only a bowl of watery rice.

'To each according to his needs' was the slogan heralded by model counties such as Xushui, but all too often the reality was much closer to Lenin's dictum that 'he who does not work shall not eat'. Some collectives even divided the local population into different groups according to their work performance, each being given a different ration. Calories were distributed according to muscle. The idea was to cut the ration from those who underperformed and use it as a bonus to encourage the better workers. It was a simple and effective system to manage scarcity, rewarding the strong at the expense of the weak. A similar system had been devised in similar circumstances when the Nazis were confronted with such food shortages that they could no longer feed their slave labourers. Günther Falkenhahn, director of a mine that supplied IG Farben's chemicals complex, divided his Ostarbeiter into three classes, concentrating the available food on those workers who provided the best return per unit of calories. Those at the bottom fell into a fatal spiral of malnutrition and underperformance. By 1943 he had received national recognition, and the idea of *Leistungsernährung*, or 'performance feeding', was promulgated as standard practice in the employment of Ostarbeiter.<sup>69</sup>

No order ever came from above, instructing party members to restrict adequate feeding to above-average workers, but it seemed an effective enough strategy to some cadres keen to obtain maximum output for minimal expense. In Peach Village, Guangdong, the cadres divided the farmers into twelve different grades, calibrated according to performance. Workers in the top grade were given just under 500 grams of grain a day. Those lingering at the bottom received a mere 150 grams a day, a starvation diet that weeded out the most vulnerable elements. They were replaced by others who inexorably slipped down the ranks, edging closer to the end. One in ten were starved to death in 1960.<sup>70</sup> In fact, throughout the country, as we have seen, units were divided into different ranks, red, grey and white flags being handed out to advanced, mediocre and backward units. It was a small step to elaborate the system further and make calorie income dependent on rank. In Jintang county, for instance, one village divided its members into 'superior', 'middle' and 'inferior' groups, their names respectively listed on red, green or white paper. Members of different ranks were not allowed to mix. Red names were praised, but white names were relentlessly persecuted, many ending up in makeshift labour camps for 're-education'.<sup>71</sup>

Suicide reached epidemic proportions. For every murder, an untold number suffered in one way or another, and some of these opted to end their lives. Often it was not so much the pain that pushed a person to end it all as the shame and humiliation endured in front of other villagers. A set phrase was that such and such, having strayed from the path, 'was afraid of punishment and committed suicide'. 'Driven to their deaths' or 'driven against the wall' were also common expressions used to describe self-murder. In Fengxian, Shanghai, of the 960 people who were killed in the space of a few months in the summer of 1958, ninety-five 'were forced into an impasse and committed suicide', while the others died of untreated illnesses, torture or exhaustion.<sup>72</sup> As a very rough rule of thumb (figures, again, are woefully unreliable), about 3 to 6 per cent of avoidable deaths were caused by suicide, meaning that between 1 and 3 million people took their lives during the Great Leap Forward.

In Puning, Guangdong, suicides were described as 'ceaseless'; some people ended their lives out of shame for having stolen from fellow villagers.<sup>73</sup> When collective punishment was meted out, those who felt guilty for having endangered others committed suicide. In Kaiping county, a fifty-six-year-old lady pilfered two handfuls of grain. Her entire household was banned from the canteen for five days and sent to a labour camp. She committed suicide.<sup>74</sup> Sometimes women took their children with them, knowing that they would not survive on their own. In Shantou a woman accused of theft tied her two children to her body before jumping into the river.<sup>75</sup>



In cities, too, suicide rates rocketed, although there are few reliable figures. The Bureau of Public Security in Nanjing, for instance, was alarmed when it reported that in the first half of 1959 some 200 people had jumped into the river to commit suicide. The majority were women.<sup>76</sup> Many killed themselves because their families had been torn apart by collectivisation. Tang Guiying, for instance, lost her son to illness. Then her house was destroyed to make way for an irrigation project. She joined her husband who worked in a Nanjing factory. When the authorities launched a campaign to send villagers back to the countryside, he did nothing to protect her. She hanged herself.<sup>77</sup>



## Sites of Horror

The horror of mass destruction was first encountered by the party leadership in Xinyang: it reduced Li Xiannian, a tough veteran of the Red Army, to tears. The immediate reaction was to blame counter-revolutionaries. Soon a campaign unfolded across the country to take power back from the forces of reaction, often with military backing from the centre. But in a clever move designed to portray Xinyang as an exception, reports were released within the party relating to the 'Xinyang incident'. To this was added the 'Fengyang incident', named after a dusty county in a plain by the Huai River in Anhui province. Here too a reign of terror had claimed a quarter of the 335,000 villagers. A compilation of party reports on both cases started circulating in the 1980s, including a 600-page document that was smuggled out of China in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. These subsequently became the basis for most studies of the period. Xinyang became a byword for the famine.

However, local cadres who convened across the country to discuss the Xinyang report in 1961 were unimpressed. In Xiangtan, Hunan, a county where tens of thousands had died, some cadres thought that the Xinyang incident paled in comparison to what had happened in their own backyard. Why should it be called an 'incident', some wondered?<sup>1</sup>

There are, indeed, vast numbers of villages where death claimed more than 30 per cent of the population in a single year – in some cases entire hamlets were wiped out. But counties are much larger political entities, their populations typically ranging from 120,000 to 350,000. A death rate of 10 per cent in one year across an entire county, composed of many hundreds of villages, some tightly clustered together, others divided by hills, rivers or forests, could have occurred only under immense political pressure. These sites of horror, where deceit and terror combined to produce mass killings, existed across the country. Every province under the leadership of a political zealot had several, some even boasted a dozen. There is unlikely to be a complete list of such cases any time soon, given that so much of the party archives remains locked away, but below is a provisional list of fifty-six counties, which will no doubt grow as better sources become available. It is based on a compilation of forty counties by Wang Weizhi, a demographer who worked for the Public Security Bureau in Beijing.<sup>2</sup> But his information is incomplete, as it is derived from official figures sent to the capital rather than on local findings. A number of counties have been added to the list on the basis of the archival material consulted for this book (they are marked with an asterisk). Several of these cases will be examined in this chapter.

Sichuan: Shizhu, Yingjing, Fuling\*, Rongxian, Dazu\*, Ziyang, Xiushan, Youyang, Nanxi, Dianjiang, Leshan, Jianwei, Muchuan, Pingshan\*, Bixian\*, Ya'an\*, Lushan\*, Seda\*

Anhui: Chaoxian, Taihe, Dingyuan, Wuwei, Xuancheng, Haoxian, Suxian, Fengyang, Fuyang, Feidong, Wuhe

Henan: Guangshan, Shangcheng, Xincui, Runan, Tanghe, Xixian, Gushi, Zhengyang, Shangcai, Suiping

Gansu: Tongwei\*, Longxi\*, Wuwei\*

Guizhou: Meitan, Chishui, Jinsha, Tongzi

Qinghai: Huangzhong, Zaduo, Zhenghe

Shandong: Juye\*, Jining\*, Qihe\*, Pingyuan\*

Hunan: Guzhang\*

Guangxi: Huanjiang

Tongwei, in the north-west of Gansu, was one of the poorest areas in the country. Set among undulating hills and divided by ravines on an arid loess plateau, it was once an important stop on the ancient silk road. Before the centre of gravity moved away towards the lush south, the region had heaved with human activity, as good use was made of the rich loess. Signs of the past are everywhere, as the soil is easy to dig. Walls, houses and mounds for tombs were made of loess and seemed to be carved straight out of the landscape. Caves were sculpted out of brittle hills, some with arched openings and dusty courtyards. Over time wind and rain eroded the mountain, and the dwellings ended up standing on their own. Terraces on top of hills and roads through deep valleys blended into a landscape of dirt that was moulded over the ages by busy hands. The Red Army occupied Tongwei in September 1935, where Mao composed an ode to the Long March.

Xi Daolong, head of the county, was a model party member, selected in May 1958 by the province to attend

one of the communist party's most prestigious meetings in Beijing. When the Chairman's call for radical collectivisation came a few months later, Xi responded with zeal, amalgamating all the co-operatives into fourteen giant communes. Under the watchful eyes of the militia, everything was collectivised, land, livestock, homes, tools and even pots, tins and jars were confiscated. Farmers had to follow every dictate from party leaders. As Tongwei was a key link in the province's plan to divert a tributary of the Yellow River up the mountains to create a water highway which would turn the arid plateau into a green garden, one in five farmers was dispatched to work on a reservoir. In order to please an inspection team, sent to spur on work on the irrigation scheme, half of all villagers were dragged out to distant construction sites in the midst of the harvest. The crop was allowed to rot in the fields. In a poverty-stricken county where farmers only just managed to eke out a living, more than 13,000 hectares were abandoned in the first year of the Great Leap Forward alone. Over the years the harvest shrank, from 82,000 tonnes in 1957 to 58,000 tonnes in 1958, to 42,000 in 1959 and finally to a miserable 18,000 tonnes in 1960. But the procurements increased. Xi Daolong reported a bumper harvest of 130,000 tonnes in 1958. The state took a third. In 1959 Xi again reported twice as much. As the state now took almost half, there was hardly any grain left.<sup>3</sup>

Villagers who complained were branded rightists, saboteurs or anti-party agitators. The head of the county, a man called Tian Buxiao, was deeply shaken by what he saw in the countryside. He was denounced as an anti-party element and repeatedly subjected to struggle sessions as a 'small Peng Dehuai'. He committed suicide in October 1959. Over a thousand cadres who objected in one way or another were taken to task. Some were dismissed, others locked up, but torture was also widespread, in particular against villagers. People were buried alive in the caves carved from the loess hills. In the winter they were buried under the snow. Other forms of torture were used, including bamboo needles. In the unedited report appended to the file containing the final version sent up to the provincial committee, a sentence mentions that 'people were beaten to death and made into compost'.<sup>4</sup> More than 1,300 were beaten or tortured to death. By the winter of 1959–60 people were eating bark, roots and chaff.<sup>5</sup>

According to a report compiled by the county committee in Tongwei a few years after the famine, some 60,000 people died in 1959 and 1960 (the county had 210,000 villagers in 1957). Few households escaped starvation. Almost everyone had several relatives who died of hunger, and more than 2,000 families were entirely wiped out.<sup>6</sup>

Xi Daolong was eventually arrested, but he could hardly have presided over a reign of terror lasting several years without the support of his superiors. One rung above him stood Dou Minghai, party secretary of the Dingxi region to which Tongwei belonged. Dou himself was under constant scrutiny from Zhang Zhongliang, the boss in Gansu. So intense was the pressure that he considered villagers who tried to escape from the region to be 'all bad', every one of them guilty of 'opposing the party'. He kept on pressing for higher procurement rates, declaring that 'I would rather that people die of hunger than ask the state for grain.'<sup>7</sup> But in the end even his superiors could no longer ignore the extent of the starvation, and a hundred-strong team was sent from the provincial capital Lanzhou in February 1960. Xi Daolong and his aides were arrested.<sup>8</sup> A month later a report was sent to Beijing. The central leadership declared Tongwei to be 'completely rotten'.<sup>9</sup>

Sichuan, unlike Gansu, is a rich and fertile province traditionally known as the 'land of abundance', with subtropical forests and hundreds of rivers that have been diverted since ancient times for irrigation purposes. But in this huge province the size of France, there are vast variations, with deep valleys and rugged mountains on the Western Sichuan Plateau, sparsely populated with ethnic minority people, in contrast to the basin around Chengdu, where low hills and alluvial plains support tens of millions of farmers. More counties in Sichuan than anywhere else had a death rate of over 10 per cent a year. Most were impoverished areas in the mountains around the basin area, but quite a few were scattered around Chongqing, a city clinging higgledy-piggledy to steep cliffs by the Yangzi.

This was the case, for instance, with Fuling, a relatively prosperous county with terraced fields along the Yangzi River in the hinterland outside Chongqing. Baozi, a commune of 15,000 people known as 'Fuling's grain storage', produced such abundant harvests that it usually sent half of its produce as tribute to the state. Along the main road up to 400 people could be found on any one day, busy bringing grain, vegetables and pigs to market. But by 1961 grain output had plummeted by some 87 per cent. The fields were overgrown with weeds, and half of the population had vanished. A 'wind of communism' had blown over the commune, as bricks, wood,

pots, tools and even needles and nappies for babies had been confiscated in a mad scramble for collectivisation in which the very notion of individual property was seen as 'rightist conservatism'. 'We can eat our fill even without agriculture for three years', was the slogan of the day, as 70 per cent of the workforce was diverted away from agriculture towards the building of large canteens, piggeries and markets. People still working in the fields had to follow commands from the commune, for instance tearing out acres of maize because a deputy party secretary thought that the leaves were turned in the wrong direction. Close planting, on the other hand, killed the rice crop on some of the most fertile plots. In parts of the commune 80 per cent of the rice terraces were converted to dry land for vegetables, with disastrous results. Then, as an order came from Li Jingquan that advanced units should help turn the mountains into a rich green, with slopes covered with wheat, farmers were made to abandon the fertile terraces to scrape the rocky earth up in the highlands many miles away.

To conceal the precipitous decline in agricultural output, in 1959 the commune leaders declared a crop of 11,000 tonnes instead of the 3,500 tonnes in storage. The state took 3,000 tonnes. The militia went around checking for hidden stashes of grain, taking whatever they could get their hands on. Struggle sessions punctuated the daily schedule. Body weight was the class line demarcating the poor from the rich: to be fat was to be a rightist, and rightists were ceaselessly pursued – often to the death. In the end people had nothing to eat but bark and mud. Up to a third of the population died in some of the villages in Baozi.<sup>10</sup>

Baozi was by no means exceptional. Throughout Fuling county, death rates were high, with some villages losing 9 per cent of their people in a single month in 1960.<sup>11</sup> An average death rate of 40 to 50 per cent was not uncommon in brigades across the region.<sup>12</sup>

Other counties in the Chongqing area also had death rates of over 10 per cent in 1960, for instance Shizhu, Xiushan and Youyang. In Shizhu the militia forbade villagers from foraging for roots and wild herbs, searching every home for pots and pans to prevent cooking outside the canteens. Violence was common, as 'beating squads' (darendui) in parts of the county took charge of discipline; some carried pincers and bamboo needles. Chen Zhilin, a deputy secretary of one of the communes, beat several hundred people, killing eight. Some were buried alive. In the county as a whole – according to the Public Security Bureau – some 64,000 people died in 1959–60 alone, or 20 per cent of the population. So overwhelmed by waves of death were the authorities that in the end the dead were cast into mass graves. Forty bodies were tossed into a pit in Shuitian commune. Near the road to the county capital, another sixty corpses were buried in a shallow trench, but the job was carried out so badly that twenty of the bodies had parts sticking out of the ground, which were soon attacked by ravenous dogs. As coffin wood was scarce, several dead toddlers at a time were carried out in rattan containers to be buried.<sup>13</sup>

Far away from the lush valleys along the Yangzi, pitched battles bloodied the grasslands up in the Tibetan plateau to the west. In 1959 in Serthar (Seda), a county in the Ganzi autonomous region, Tibetans were rounded up and forced into collectives, after Lhasa had been rocked by rebellion and the Dalai Lama forced to flee on foot over the Himalayan mountains into India. Dozens of uprisings took place in Ganzi by the end of 1958, leading to thousands of arrests and many executions.<sup>14</sup> In Serthar widespread slaughter preceded collectivisation, since herdsmen preferred to kill their sheep rather than hand them over to the state. Tens of thousands of animals were butchered and eaten. The cadres, in control of the grain, refused to feed the nomads, using the militia to extract every possible hint of wealth from those they considered to be their enemies. Corralled into makeshift communes, many people died of disease. Whereas the nomads had had access to clean water all year round, they were now packed into shoddy encampments without adequate facilities, and quickly overrun with excrement and detritus. Out of a population of some 16,000, about 15 per cent died in 1960 alone. About 40 per cent of those who died were beaten or tortured to death.<sup>15</sup>

Guizhou, unlike its northern neighbour Sichuan, is an impoverished province, historically rocked by rebellions from the minority people who compose at least a third of the population – many of them living in poverty in the hills and highlands that dominate what is known as the 'kingdom of mountains'. Chishui, once prosperous as a strategically located pass for the transportation of salt, is a forlorn outpost on the border with Sichuan. The river that flows through a red sandstone valley picks up the sediment and gives the place its name, which means 'Red Water'. In March 1935 the Red Army crossed the river several times, turning the county into a holy ground keenly promoted by local leaders after the revolution. Up in the scarlet mountains, small villages were hidden among giant tree ferns and bright-green bamboo, but most of the people grew paddy and sugarcane along the



river and its tributaries. Between October 1959 and April 1960, around 24,000 people died – more than 10 per cent of the population.<sup>16</sup>

Wang Linchi, a relatively young man at thirty-five, was in charge of the county. He was given a coveted red flag in 1958 and was commended by the central leadership for having transformed a backwater into a 'Five-Thousand-Kilo County' thanks to the many innovations heralded by the Great Leap Forward. In Chishui, under Wang Linchi, deep ploughing meant digging to a depth of 1 to 1.5 metres: the deeper the better. Large quantities of seed were used, often 200 to 450 kilos per hectare, but at times as much as a tonne or two, sometimes even three tonnes. Among other great schemes devised by the county leadership was an irrigation project in which water would be conveyed through a network of bamboo pipes to every plot in the county. 'Water pipes in the skies of Chishui' was the slogan, but the scheme failed miserably after acres of bamboo forest were chopped down, depriving the villagers of a much-needed resource.

The result of the Great Leap Forward in Chishui was a plummeting grain output and the virtual extermination of the livestock. But Wang was determined to maintain his reputation. As early as September 1958, many months before Zhao Ziyang's report on the hiding of grain in Guangdong, he decreed that a part of the crop was being withheld by 'rich peasants' and 'bad elements' in a sustained attack on the socialist system. A merciless counter-attack with armed cadres was required to save the communes and prevent a counter-revolution. People on the ground were terrorised. A year later, in the wake of the Lushan plenum, villagers were divided into 'poor peasants' and 'rich peasants'. Behind the backs of rich peasants stood the landlords, saboteurs, counter-revolutionaries and other elements who were bent on wrecking the revolution: 'Poor and Rich Peasants, This Struggle is to the Death!' Several thousand cadres were expelled from the party for having the wrong class background, while mass demonstrations, struggle meetings and anti-hiding campaigns were organised to root out every class enemy. Like Mao, Wang Linchi was a poet, composing verses to celebrate the working class and organising a traditional opera in which he starred as the main actor – before hundreds of invited guests tucking into a lavish banquet. In the meantime, agriculture was neglected: although in January 1960 Wang announced to his superiors in Guiyang a bumper crop of 33,500 tonnes, 80 per cent of this amount existed on paper only.<sup>17</sup>

Wang Linchi was hardly a unique case in Guizhou, a radical province led by Zhou Lin, a close follower of Mao. Everywhere Zhou Lin tacitly encouraged a radical approach to the Great Leap Forward, resulting in one of the highest death rates in the country. In Meitan, famous for its tea, 45,000 people died in six months. Wang Qingchen, the first party secretary, deployed a labour force of 50,000 at will, building giant tea gardens, orchards, irrigation systems and communal buildings that would turn Meitan into a national model. Forty thousand pigs were requisitioned for a 'Ten-Thousand-Hog City'. Anybody critical of these schemes was accused of 'stirring an evil revisionist trend' and given the label of 'rightist opportunist'. In 1960 an 'Arrest Many and Detain Many' campaign was organised by the police and the militia, sweeping across the region and locking up close to 3,000 people in a month. A simple slogan seemed to capture the Meitan spirit: 'Those Who are Unable to Produce Grain will Not be Given Any Grain'.<sup>18</sup>

The figure of 45,000 deaths is very high, but even so it may be an underestimate. According to an investigation by the provincial party committee, in one commune alone 12,000 people 'died of starvation', representing 22 per cent of the population.<sup>19</sup> Focusing on one village, a more detailed inquest showed how over a third of the farmers died. Nongcha was once a relatively prosperous village, in which each family owned a few ducks and chickens, but by 1961 the crop had decreased to a third of what had been produced in 1957. Vegetables were hard to come by. Sugarcane production, indispensable for local farmers to trade against food and goods, was virtually wiped out. Many of the fields lay destroyed after experiments in deep ploughing and land reclamation. Some were called 'moon plots' because the pockmarked terrain would no longer retain any water. No work points were ever kept, and villages were fed according to the whims of local cadres in chaotic canteens. Personal property was seized, private plots were abolished. State procurements were sky high despite falling grain production: in 1959 three-quarters of the crop was dragged away by state agents, leaving the villagers to starve. By 1961 one pig was left in the entire village.<sup>20</sup>

When an inspection team was scheduled to visit Meitan in April 1960, the local leaders scurried about day and night to bury corpses in mass graves by the side of the road. Sick villagers and neglected children were locked up and guarded by the militia, while telltale trees without bark were torn out, roots and all.<sup>21</sup> Travelling through the region in March 1960, Nie Rongzhen was ecstatic about Guizhou in a letter to Mao: 'In fact Guizhou is not poor at all, it is very rich – in future it should be our industrial base in the south-west!'<sup>22</sup>

As the Yellow River nears the end of its long journey across the loess plateau, it intersects with the Grand Canal, an ancient man-made river completed in the seventh century to haul the grain tribute from the south to the imperial capital in the north. It is said that more than 47,000 labourers were needed to maintain the canal system, which was used, at its height in the mid-fifteenth century, by some 11,000 grain barges. Qihe is the main river port in Shandong, lying just north-west of Jinan, and it should have fared well thanks to its strategic location on the Yellow River. Before the Great Leap Forward it was known as a 'grain store' with an abundant crop that managed to reach 200,000 tonnes in a good year for a population of roughly half a million. Cotton, tobacco and fruit were also widely cultivated. By 1961 Qihe county had lost well over 100,000 people, or a fifth of its population compared to 1957. Half of the workers who had survived or stayed behind were sick. The economy lay in tatters. The 200,000 tonnes of grain harvested in 1956 had dwindled to a mere 16,000 a few years later. The collapse in peanut production was even more dramatic: whereas 7,780 tonnes had been taken from the fields in 1956, a pitiful 10 tonnes was all that could be gathered by 1961. Everything, it seemed, was reduced to about one-tenth of what could have been expected before 1958. Even the land under cultivation had shrunk, as a fifth was taken away for waterworks and roads, most of which were never finished. As everywhere in the north, the amount of alkaline soil doubled, reaching almost a third of the surface under cultivation. Despite – or rather as a consequence of – massive investment in water-conservancy projects, the overall irrigated surface shrank by 70 per cent. Off the fields the devastation was just as visible. Livestock was more than halved, the number of carts dwindled, while tens of thousands of simple tools such as rakes and hoes had vanished. Over half of all trees had been felled. Of all the housing in the county 38 per cent had been destroyed. Of what was left standing, a quarter was heavily damaged and needed urgent attention. Some 13,000 families did not even have a single room left to themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Hanzhuang was one of the many hamlets in Qihe county. It had 240 villagers in 1957, but by 1961 only 141 remained. A quarter of the village had died of hunger, one in six families having been entirely extinguished – a fact which always carried a great deal of weight in a culture which continued to emphasise descent, despite all the official rhetoric of class war. Between 1958 and 1961 only four children had been born in the village, one of whom had died in infancy. Many villagers were single, most were weak or sick, and few women from other villages were willing to marry local men. The village had lost some 40 per cent of its land, and well over half of what remained was almost barren through heavy salinisation. According to a local saying, 'on leaving the house one beholds a white expanse', as the salt whitened the earth for as far as the eye could see. In the midst of this thin, exhausted land stood derelict mud huts.

The village had boasted a total of 240 rooms, but a mere eighty remained standing, most of them with leaky roofs or walls that had caved in. There was nothing inside these miserable dwellings, as an inspection team revealed: 'All the families have gone bankrupt through the famine. Those least affected have sold all their clothes and furniture, while the most damaged ones have had to sell their pots, bowls and basins, as well as the wood stripped from their houses. In the village twenty-seven families have sold everything they had.' Yang Jimao, for instance, left the village in 1960. His wife and child could survive only by selling every possession. They had no bed, no pots and no tools to cultivate the land. They shared a ragged blanket and a threadbare coat. Others were worse off. Among the few people who had stayed in Hanzhuang was Liu Zailin, aged thirty-three, who soon died of hunger. His wife hanged herself from a rafter, leaving behind two children who were adopted by local villagers.

In Shandong the teams sent to investigate what had happened during the famine were coy about pointing the finger at abusive cadres, unlike their peers in Gansu or Guangdong. But the political dimensions of the famine were clear. The head of the village had changed fifteen times since the Great Leap Forward. Few could do anything to resist punitive procurements imposed from above, and in 1959 the villagers were left with an average of twenty-five kilos of grain per person – for the entire year. Widespread conscription of labour on irrigation projects did not help. In the winter of 1959–60 forty-six of the best labourers were recruited from Hanzhuang. They worked for forty days and nights on end, in the snow, but were not given any grain, which had to be supplied by the village, already depleted by state requisitions. Some died while digging earth outside in the cold, others dropped dead by the roadside on the way home.<sup>24</sup>

Across the Shandong countryside there were countless villages in a similar predicament, broken by four years of mass abuse. Early warning signs had appeared in April 1959. Tan Qilong, a senior leader in Shandong, personally witnessed how in several counties in the Jining region the trees had been stripped bare, children were abandoned and farmers died along the roadside, their faces sallow from hunger. In Juye people ate the



straw from their pillows; thousands died of hunger. Tan Qilong reported this situation to provincial boss Shu Tong, but also took the exceptional step of sending a copy to Mao Zedong.<sup>25</sup> A few weeks later, a contrite Shu Tong had to explain the 'Jining incident' to the Chairman, who was passing through the region in his special train.<sup>26</sup>

But Shu Tong did nothing to alleviate the famine. By his own admission, he detested bad news and refused even to talk about 'one finger' of shortcomings in Shandong, threatening those who were critical of the Great Leap Forward with the label of 'rightist conservatism'.<sup>27</sup> According to others who had to work alongside Shu Tong, the regional tsar exploded in a violent rage when anybody prevented him from enforcing a utopian vision that had cost the lives of countless people. 'He who strikes first prevails, he who strikes last fails': Shu Tong religiously followed Mao's advice about seizing the grain before the farmers could eat it, enforcing vast procurements to satisfy the demands from Beijing.<sup>28</sup>

Gansu, Sichuan, Guizhou, Shandong – all these provinces contained counties where the death rate was above 10 per cent in 1960. But nothing was as bad as Anhui, run by Zeng Xisheng, one of Mao's most devoted followers. Like other provinces, Anhui was divided into regions, having over a dozen. One of these regions was Fuyang. Fuyang had a population of 8 million in 1958. Three years later more than 2.4 million people had died.<sup>29</sup>

One of the reasons for the high death rate was the landscape itself. Flat and generally barren, it offered few places to hide. Many of those who wanted to flee the area followed the river into Xinyang, in neighbouring Henan, where the famine was even worse. The Huai River itself was a web of death. In 1957 it became the focus of a huge irrigation project which commanded up to 80 per cent of the labour force. Every hectare would have a duct, every ten hectares a canal and every hundred hectares a large waterway. Fields would be as smooth as a mirror, deep ploughing making the soil as pliable as dough. Fuyang would catch up with the future in a mere year or two.<sup>30</sup> Slogans such as 'On a Rainy Day We See a Bright Day, the Night Becomes the Day' and 'In Daytime We Fight the Sun, At Night We Battle the Stars' were behind the ceaseless exploitation of the best workers along the river. Many succumbed to disease, exhaustion and death.<sup>31</sup>

To prevent workers from returning home over the Chinese New Year, the militia sealed their homes. With the inexorable advance of dams, dykes and channels, everything in the way was flattened. Trees, graves, even large bridges were torn down, forcing farmers to walk for several kilometres each day to attend to the fields.<sup>32</sup> Entire villages were compelled to relocate overnight at the whim of a cadre: hundreds simply vanished from the map.<sup>33</sup>

Other giant schemes took away the best workers from the fields before the sowing or reaping was even completed. So abundant was the crop – the party line went – that grain should be turned into alcohol. Hao county, striving to become a 'Five-Thousand-Tonne County', built more than 3,200 alcohol factories in January 1959. Less than half ever worked, and many tonnes of grain went to waste.<sup>34</sup>

Just as ruinous were efforts to mechanise agriculture. Clunky iron wheels were added to some 10,000 carts, which were so heavy that bulls could no longer pull them.<sup>35</sup> To compound the problem, the old carts were banned from the roads, and farmers seen to use them were denounced as rightists.<sup>36</sup>

The grain output plunged, but zealous cadres doubled it on paper. Punitive requisitions followed; carried out with routine violence, they sometimes extracted close to 90 per cent of the actual crop.<sup>37</sup> To compensate for the shortage in grain, cadres burst into local households and carried away tables, chairs and beds. Farmers were even forced to turn in a set amount of cotton clothes, up to several kilos per family. Failure to fulfil the quota led to a ban from the canteen. Zhao Huai ren had to hand over the cotton jackets of his seventy-year-old mother and his child. In the freezing cold they had to bury themselves underneath some straw to keep warm. By 1960 there was so little left to collect that in one commune the biggest haul consisted of a hundred coffins.<sup>38</sup>

Torture was rampant. Iron wire was used to pierce the ears of 'bad elements', while women were stripped and suspended by their hair. In the words of a leader in Jieshou county, 'their breasts were twisted until liquid oozed out'.<sup>39</sup> In Linquan, the use of violence was summarised as follows by the local party boss: 'People died in tragic circumstances, being beaten and hanged to death, deprived of food or buried alive. Some were severely tortured and beaten, having their ears chopped off, their noses dug out, their mouths torn off, and so on, which often caused death. We discovered how extremely serious all of this was once we started investigating.'<sup>40</sup> Murder was common. In Dahuangzhuang, a small village in Linquan, nine out of nineteen cadres had killed at

least one villager during the famine. Li Fengying, a team leader, killed five people.<sup>41</sup>

In some cases villagers were deliberately entrapped. In late 1959, at the height of the famine, one of the food-processing factories belonging to the local grain bureau in Funan county left bean cakes in a courtyard with the gates wide open. As starving farmers tried to pilfer the food, the gates were suddenly locked behind them. 'Some of those who were caught were forced into a grain sack that was tied at the end. Then they were beaten with iron bars. The sacks were covered in blood. Others had their faces carved by knives and then oil rubbed into the wounds.'<sup>42</sup>

Help for the famished was withheld. Fifteen tonnes of grain sent to support those in need in one county alone were confiscated, hastening the deaths of thousands.<sup>43</sup> People also died when the local authorities tried to hide the famine from inspection teams. The militia, for instance, were instructed to seal off the villages and not to allow anyone with signs of starvation on to the streets.<sup>44</sup> In one commune targeted for a visit by the Ministry of Interior in 1960, the county head scrambled to round up and hide more than 3,000 villagers with oedema. Locked up without any medical support, several hundred died in a matter of days.<sup>45</sup> A local cadre had a quick look at Qin Zonghuai, who was one of those suffering from oedema. 'He won't live, bury him quickly,' he ordered, as an inspection team was on its way. 'He was still breathing while being buried,' concluded the local party secretary.<sup>46</sup>



## Cannibalism

The countryside was a world of noise before the famine. Hawkers filled the air with their chants, some using rattles to advertise their wares. The din of gongs, cymbals and firecrackers traditionally accompanied popular events, whether a burial or a wedding. Loudspeakers nailed to trees by street corners and village squares blasted out propaganda and revolutionary music. Passing trucks and buses, clouds of yellow dust billowing behind them, would have worked their horns incessantly. Boisterous conversations were yelled across fields, so loud that outsiders might mistake them for a bitter argument.

But after years of famine an eerie, unnatural silence descended upon the countryside. The few pigs that had not been confiscated had died of hunger and disease. Chickens and ducks had long since been slaughtered. There were no birds left in the trees, which had been stripped of their leaves and bark, their bare and bony spines standing stark against an empty sky. People were often famished beyond speech.

In this world plundered of every layer that might offer sustenance, down to bark and mud, corpses often ended up in shallow graves or simply by the roadside. A few people ate human flesh. This began in Yunnan, where the famine started in the summer of 1958. At first the carcasses of diseased livestock were unearthed, but as famine tightened its grip some people eventually dug up, boiled and ate human bodies.<sup>1</sup> Soon the practice appeared in every region decimated by starvation, even in a relatively prosperous province such as Guangdong. For example in Tanbin, Luoding, a commune where one in twenty villagers died in 1960, several children were eaten.<sup>2</sup>

Few archives offer more than an oblique reference to cannibalism, but some police reports are quite detailed. In a small village in Xili county, Gansu, villagers caught the whiff of boiling meat from the hut of a neighbour. They reported the man to the village secretary, who suspected that a sheep might have been stolen and proceeded to inspect the premises. He discovered flesh stored in vats, as well as a hair clip, ornaments and a scarf buried at the bottom of a pit. The artefacts were immediately identified as the belongings of a young girl who had vanished from the village days earlier. The man not only confessed to the murder, but also owned up to having unearthed and eaten the corpses of young children on two previous occasions. After the village had taken measures to protect the graves from desecration, he had turned to murder.<sup>3</sup>

Human flesh, like everything else, was traded on the black market. A farmer who bartered a pair of shoes for a kilo of meat at the Zhangye railway station found that the package contained a human nose and several ears. He decided to report the finding to the local Public Security Bureau.<sup>4</sup> To escape detection, human flesh was sometimes mixed with dog meat when sold on the black market.<sup>5</sup>

But few reports were ever systematically compiled. Under a regime in which the mere mention of famine could land a cadre in trouble, cases of cannibalism were covered up wherever they appeared. In Gansu province the provincial leader Zhang Zhongliang was personally told of a string of cases in Tongwei, Yumen, Wushan, Jingning and Wudu, but he dismissed the evidence out of hand, blaming 'bad elements'.<sup>6</sup> Shu Tong, leader of Shandong, also suppressed evidence about cannibalism, fearing that adverse news would harm his reputation.<sup>7</sup> Wang Linchi, the county leader of Chishui, one of the sites of horror covered in the previous chapter, took the local security forces to task for arresting villagers guilty of cannibalism.<sup>8</sup> So unmentionable was the topic that in a report distributed to the party leadership the blame for the practice was placed on saboteurs who had tried to tarnish the reputation of the party by exhuming human bodies, pretending to eat them in order to publicise the extent of the famine.<sup>9</sup>

A few fairly comprehensive documents have survived. One of these was compiled in March 1961 by a municipal unit in Linxia, a city south of Lanzhou. Linxia was heavily influenced by Islam, populated predominantly by Hui people and the capital of a region with a dozen other ethnic minorities, including Tibetans, Salar, Bao'an and Dongxiang. The region suffered from mass collectivisation during the Great Leap Forward, which ran roughshod over the habits and customs of minorities. An investigation of the region in the immediate aftermath of the famine showed that 54,000 people had died in a mere two years.<sup>10</sup> The report listed some fifty cases – discovered in the city, not in the entire region – all comprehensively arranged in the

kind of list that was so much in favour with the planners, reducing horror to a mere set of facts and figures. Here are the details of four such cases:

Date: 25 February 1960. Location: Hongtai Commune, Yaohejia Village. Name of Culprit: Yang Zhongsheng. Status: Poor Farmer. Number of People Involved: 1. Name of Victim: Yang Ershun. Relationship with Culprit: Younger Brother. Number of People Involved: 1. Manner of Crime: Killed and Eaten. Reason: Livelihood Issues.

Date: [void]. Location: [void]. Name of Culprit: Ma Manai. Status: Poor Farmer. Number of People Involved: Entire Family of 4. Name of Victim: [void]. Relationship with Culprit: [void]. Number of People Involved: 13. Manner of Crime: Corpses Exhumed and Eaten. Reason: Livelihood Issues.

Date: 9 Jan. 1960. Location: Maji Commune, Zhangsama Village. Name of Culprit: Kang Gamai. Status: Poor Farmer. Number of People Involved: 1. Name of Victim: Maha Maji. Relationship with Culprit: Fellow Villager. Number of People Involved: 1. Manner of Crime: Hacked to Death, Cooked and Eaten. Reason: Livelihood Issues.

Date: March 1960. Location: Hongtai Commune, Xiaogou Gate. Name of Culprit: Zhu Shuangxi. Status: Poor Farmer. Number of People Involved: 2. Name of Victim: [void]. Relationship with Culprit: Husband and Elder Son. Number of People Involved: 2. Manner of Crime: Corpses Exhumed and Eaten. Reason: Livelihood Issues.

Most of the culprits on the list practised necrophagy, either eating those who had passed away or exhuming and eating cadavers after burial. The seventy-six victims fell into three categories: killed and eaten (twelve), eaten after death (sixteen) and exhumed and eaten (forty-eight). Among those who were murdered roughly half were fellow villagers and half were strangers passing through. Only one murder took place inside the family.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

Linxia was no exception. When a team of inspectors was sent to review the Qiaotou commune in Shizhu county, Sichuan, in early 1961, they were startled by the extent of cannibalism. Rather than take note of a few cases to signal the practice, as was usual, they made the effort to investigate one brigade in depth with the help of the local Public Security Bureau. The list they compiled provided the details of sixteen victims and eighteen perpetrators. Necrophagy had apparently started after Luo Wenxiu, a seventy-year-old woman, unearthed the bodies of two small children and cooked them for herself. In some cases only parts of a body were eaten. Ma Zemin's heart, for instance, was scooped out. Much of this may have been related to the fact that most of these corpses were already in an advanced stage of putrefaction. Some people covered the meat in hot peppers.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

In Russian there is a distinction between *liudoedstvo*, literally 'people eating', and *trupoadstvo*, or 'corpse eating'. It is a very useful distinction, one which introduces much-needed nuance into a topic stigmatised not only by the party, but also by its enemies, keen to portray cannibalism as a metaphor for the very system itself. And as the villagers themselves told and retold stories about body snatchers, cannibals with red eyes or families swapping their children between them before eating them, the whole business was sensationalised to the point where it was placed under a cloud of scepticism.<sup>[13](#)</sup>

But as the cases of Linxia and Qiaotou show, very few people were actually cannibals who killed to eat. Most were scavengers, extending their survival techniques to the eating of cadavers. How they reached their decision to eat human flesh must surely have varied from one person to the next. But as desperate survivors all of them would have witnessed many of the horrors being inflicted on living human beings, from body parts being chopped off to people being buried alive. Surely, in the midst of state-sponsored violence, necrophagy was neither the most common nor the most widespread way of degrading a human being.



## The Final Tally

How many died? There will never be a satisfactory answer to that question, if only because in the midst of the great famine so few reliable statistics were kept.

So far, every noteworthy estimate has been based on the official figures on population size and on birth and death rates for 1950–82, published for the first time in the 1984 Statistical Yearbook by the National Statistical Bureau, or on the official figures of the 1953, 1964 and 1982 censuses. Immediately following the publication of the Statistical Yearbook, Basil Ashton used the official evidence to propose a figure of 30 million premature deaths during the 1958–62 period, when the overall population stood at roughly 650 million.<sup>1</sup> Judith Banister, a professional demographer, also looked at the population statistics and concluded that an estimated 30 million excess deaths appeared during 1958–61.<sup>2</sup> Since the data present a whole range of problems, from lack of internal consistency to the under-registration of births and deaths and the exclusion of the armed forces, different authors have tinkered with this or that variable either to lower or to heighten the number. Peng Xizhi, an expert in population studies, proposed an estimate of 23 million in 1987, while Jung Chang, in her book on Mao, reached a figure of 38 million.<sup>3</sup> More recently, retired journalist Yang Jisheng suggested a figure of about 36 million – also based on published statistics.<sup>4</sup>

New evidence was produced in 2005 when Cao Shuji, an historical demographer from Shanghai, systematically worked his way through more than a thousand gazetteers – official local histories published after 1979 by county or city party committees. While acknowledging that this widely diverse set of data, too, ultimately rests on figures made public by the party, it introduced a much more fine-tuned analysis of regional differences. Cao's estimate was 32.5 million premature deaths.<sup>5</sup>

How reliable are official numbers? In the Soviet Union the Central Office of Statistics produced two sets of demographic statistics, one for internal use and one for publication. But as we have already seen in the case of grain procurements, the party archives in China have widely different sets of statistics at every level, from the commune, the county and the province up to the centre. Some were compiled at the height of the collectivisation craze and were intended to convey political zeal. Others were assembled by investigation teams sent to the countryside to oversee the removal of abusive party officials. In other words, debates about whether the released figures are doctored or not miss a very basic point. There is no need for anybody to falsify figures, it is merely a matter of compiling a set of statistics which appears to be the least politically damaging. Or, to put it slightly differently, the fact that public data in a one-party state are not falsified does not necessarily make them reliable.

At least three different sets of unpublished data exist in the archives, namely those compiled by the provincial Public Security Bureau, those from the local party committee and those from the local Statistical Bureau. Nobody has ever gained access to all three sets. But after 1979, as the new leadership wanted to find out more about the Maoist era, a team of 200 was instructed by Zhao Ziyang to go around every province to examine internal party documents. The erstwhile secretary of Guangdong who had pioneered an anti-hiding campaign in 1959 was now premier, and he asked the team to draw a picture of rural China. The team's report was never published, but one of its members, a senior party official called Chen Yizi, fled to America in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989. In exile, he claimed that the team had arrived at a death toll of 43 to 46 million people for the famine.<sup>6</sup> Only one person who has investigated the famine has taken Chen Yizi's claim seriously – namely Jasper Becker, who interviewed him for his book *Hungry Ghosts* published in 1996. The archival evidence presented for the first time below vindicates Chen Yizi's findings and conservatively puts the number of premature deaths at a minimum of 45 million for the great famine of 1958–62.

Even Chen Yizi and his team would have encountered difficulties in carrying out their research. Archives, in a one-party state, are not public. They belong to the party and are controlled by the party. Except for those under the remit of the Public Security Bureaus, most of them are located in a building inside the party headquarters.

Even a high-powered delegation from Beijing could have been fobbed off or deliberately misled by experienced archivists, all the more so since a catalogue would not have existed for every collection. But, most of all, some sets were simply missing. In Hubei, for instance, the file from the party committee which should have contained the figures for all excess deaths during the famine is incomplete. Inside the brown folder is a handwritten note appended by an archivist, dated June 1979, which regrets that the item is 'missing'.<sup>7</sup> As to the Public Security Bureau, in Hubei it offered no more than a vague estimate, speculating that the death rate in 1961 was two to three times lower than the preceding year. The report wonders about the total death toll but provides no answers.<sup>8</sup>

In any event, all three organisations – the provincial public security, the provincial party committee and the provincial Statistical Bureau – would have had to rely on units lower down the party hierarchy to compile their reports. And obstruction from below was rife. In Gansu province, the provincial party committee sent out a request for estimates in 1962 for excess deaths during the famine. The project foundered, as only a handful of counties ever replied.<sup>9</sup>

But even when numbers were sent in by county authorities there were problems. First among these was the distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' deaths. Demographers distinguish between 'natural' and 'unnatural' deaths to tease out a rough estimate of how many people died prematurely as a consequence of famine. But in China the distinction was political. Industrial accidents, suicides, fatal epidemics or deaths from starvation were all a matter of great concern to the authorities. They stood as indices of social and political health, and they were diligently monitored by the party's regulators. Even a single case of suicide could signal that something was amiss, warranting a political investigation from above. In the middle of mass death in Fuyang, one of the sites of horror in Anhui where up to 70 per cent of some villages were wiped out, the region reported 10,890 deaths for the first quarter of 1961 – of which a mere 524 were described as 'abnormal', including 103 deaths due to 'emaciation' and 'oedema'.<sup>10</sup> In Rongxian, Sichuan, the county head Xu Wenzheng simply dictated that in the official statistics two rules had to be followed: birth rates had to exceed death rates, and the death rate could not be higher than 2 per cent. In Fuling, also in Sichuan, two sets of statistics were kept. For 1960 local cadres managed to count a total population of 594,324 people but reported 697,590, a difference of more than 100,000.<sup>11</sup>

Even when cadres were willing to confront the harsh reality of famine, who could have kept track of an avalanche of death? In Jiangjin and Jiangbei counties in Sichuan, up to 250 people died each day in December 1960: the last thing on the minds of local officials would have been to do the rounds each day to produce a neat list of mortality figures, even if they were specifically asked by their superiors to do so.<sup>12</sup> When local cadres or police officers did try to report the full extent of death they were generally labelled rightists. Zhao Jian, head of the Public Security Bureau in Wenjiang county, Sichuan, systematically compiled statistics for 1959 and discovered that 27,000 people, or 16 per cent, were missing compared to the previous year. He was taken to task by his superior at the provincial level but refused to modify his findings, which led directly to his political demise.<sup>13</sup>

To make matters even more complicated, obfuscation went all the way to the top. Provincial boss Liu Zihou – like so many others – dutifully reported 4,700 'abnormal deaths' to Chairman Mao for all of Hebei in 1960, even though his own team of inspectors had discovered that in one county alone some 18,000 had died of hunger since 1958.<sup>14</sup> The irony is that he chastised county leaders for covering up the extent of the famine, all the while keeping the incriminating figures from his own superiors in Beijing.<sup>15</sup> At every level party officials badgered their subordinates for the truth but were deceitful with their own superiors, contributing to a maze of self-deception. To say that knowledge is power is a truism, and one that does not go very far in explaining why the more absolute power was, the less truth it managed to produce.

But death on such a scale could hardly be hidden all the time. Sometimes local leaders took a chance, sending in hard-hitting reports further up the hierarchy, occasionally directly to Zhou Enlai or Mao Zedong himself. Extraordinarily detailed reports compiled by the investigation teams that fanned out over the countryside after October 1960 led to the removal of a whole series of leaders who had presided over mass death. And sometimes retrospective investigations were carried out in the years following the famine, as the party tried to make sense of what had happened. The result is not so much a neatly arranged set of statistics revealing some absolute truth in a few telling numbers, but rather a mass of uneven and at times messy documentation compiled in different ways, at different times, for different reasons, by different entities, with different degrees of reliability. So assigning a team of 200 people to sift through the evidence would have been a good idea.



The very best of these documents were compiled by a powerful Security Bureau and covered an entire province. As we have seen, this did not happen in Hubei, but it did in Sichuan – by far the most devastated province in all of China. The head of the provincial Security Bureau authorised an investigation into the statistics from 1954 to 1961. The results undermined many of the reported totals, which underestimated the death toll by several per cent in 1960 alone. The corrected death rate for 1954 to 1957 was an average of 1 per cent. This increased to 2.5 per cent in 1958, to 4.7 per cent in 1959, to 5.4 per cent in 1960 and to 2.9 per cent in 1961. It added up to 10.6 million deaths from 1958 to 1961, of which 7.9 million were above 1 per cent and can thus be considered 'excess deaths'.<sup>16</sup> But in Sichuan, unlike the rest of the country, famine did not vanish in 1962. There are countless reports about continuing starvation from a range of counties until the end of 1962. The Public Security Bureau compiled figures which determined that 1.5 per cent died that year, meaning that another 300,000 perished prematurely, bringing the total to 8.2 million.<sup>17</sup> Yet even this figure is no doubt too low by at least 10 or 20 per cent, if only because in Sichuan – unlike in other provinces such as Gansu – the party boss Li Jingquan remained firmly in power despite his responsibility for the deaths of many millions of people. Even in 1962 few county leaders in Sichuan would have been prepared to report the full extent of the disaster.

No other similar documents are available – so far. But we do have data collected by regional statistical bureaus. In the case of Yunnan, where the famine started in 1958, the death rate recorded for the year was 2.2 per cent, double the national average for 1957: this alone would have amounted to 430,000 excess deaths, when most historians using official statistics mention only about 800,000 deaths for the entire 1958 to 1961 period.<sup>18</sup>

The best available evidence comes from carefully compiled reports at the village, commune and county level. Since the work of the historical demographer Cao Shuji, who used published party gazetteers to estimate death rates on a county basis, is in agreement with other population specialists who propose a death toll of roughly 32 million, it provides a very helpful baseline. Common sense indicates that local party committees had every incentive to underestimate published death rates, and in that sense Cao Shuji's estimate should be considered conservative. The purpose of what follows is to test his figures and provide a rough idea of how they should be adjusted. Not only is a focus on smaller entities such as counties much more accurate than larger aggregations at the national level, but it also allows us to eliminate so many of the variables that have confused demographers working with censuses, from internal migration to the size of the army between 1958 and 1962.

However, an average death rate is required in order to calculate 'extra' death figures. What would be reasonable? Here is what Liu Shaoqi, the head of state, thought in 1961 when discussing the famine in his home town of Huaminglou, where hundreds died every month: 'What are normal deaths? What are abnormal deaths? If you hit a man once and he dies of his injuries, or if somebody jumps into a river, it qualifies as an abnormal death. You can take the figures of the last two years to calculate a normal death rate . . . A normal death rate is below 1 per cent, in general 0.8 per cent, a normal birth rate is 2 per cent, any deaths above 0.8 per cent are abnormal.'<sup>19</sup> To err on the safe side, given the wide variations across the country, 1 per cent should be taken as a normal death rate.

In the case of Hebei, we have some very detailed reports for 1960, compiled after provincial boss Liu Zihou gave the green light by asking for investigations into abnormal deaths 'down to the level of the household'. Hu Kaiming, an outspoken party official in charge of Zhangjiakou who later incurred the wrath of Mao Zedong for proposing greater freedom for farmers to determine their own prices, reported that 1.9 per cent of the population had died in 1960, amounting to 59,000 people. In Weixian county, adjacent to Zhangjiakou, the death rate was 3.4 per cent in 1960, as 18,000 people died.<sup>20</sup> That amounted to some 40,000 excessive deaths in one year. Using official documentation, Cao Shuji's figure for excessive deaths in Zhangjiakou and Weixian is 15,000 for the entire three years of famine.<sup>21</sup> In Tianjin and the surrounding countryside – hardly the most deprived part of the country – 30,000 people died within three months at the end of 1960. A normal rate of attrition would have claimed less than half of these lives. The figure provided by Cao Shuji, again based on official rather than archival sources, is 30,000 excess deaths for three years.<sup>22</sup> Another example comes from Shijiazhuang, the seat of a region covering some fifteen counties. By reading the official data critically, Cao arrives at 15,000 deaths for the entire region over three years. But in the city of Shijiazhuang alone, close to 4,000 people died in a mere ten days in January 1961, when counting the victims of starvation was no longer politically taboo.<sup>23</sup>

Tianjin, Zhangjiakou and Shijiazhuang were cities nominally isolated from starvation in the countryside. A very different example comes from Gansu, where the demotion of Zhang Zhongliang in November 1960 was followed

by several months of local investigations, bringing to light the extent of the famine. In Longxi county, 16,000 people died in 1959, or 7.5 per cent, followed by 23,000 in 1960, or 11 per cent of the population. So in those two years alone the excess deaths stood at 35,000. But for three years of famine Cao Shuji reaches 24,000 deaths.<sup>24</sup> Party archives give 32,000 deaths for Jingning county, about 7 per cent each year in 1959 and 1960. This contrasts with a figure of 19,000 excess deaths for a period of three years arrived at by Cao Shuji.<sup>25</sup> In Zhangye, out of a population of roughly 280,000, some 5,000 people died in November, followed by 6,000 in December 1960. Even if we double the normal rate of attrition to 2 per cent, that would still represent over 10,000 excess deaths in less than a quarter of a year. Cao Shuji arrives at 17,000 excess deaths – not for one county in two months, but for four counties over a period of three years.<sup>26</sup> In the spring of 1960 some 20,000 people died in Wuwei county alone. Cao Shuji suggests 50,000 premature deaths for a region comprising four counties, over a period of three years.<sup>27</sup>

In Guizhou the provincial party committee reckoned by 1961 that some 10 per cent of the workforce was missing when compared with 1957 – meaning half a million workers, not counting children and the elderly.<sup>28</sup> Not all of these had died, of course, as many had migrated out of the province, but the death rates were high throughout Guizhou, in particular in regions such as Chishui and Meitan. In Chishui some 22,000 people died in half a year – or 10 per cent of the population.<sup>29</sup> Cao Shuji, using the official record of the county, proposes 46,000 over a period of three years, which seems reasonable enough. But in the case of Meitan, 45,000 people died in half a year. Cao Shuji suggests 105,000 for four counties over a period of three years, which must be too low.<sup>30</sup> Even more interesting is that in his extremely conscientious compilation of the official data for all counties, some places are missing: Yanhe, part of the Tongren region, is not mentioned, although some 40,000–50,000 people died of hunger in that county alone.<sup>31</sup>

In Shandong the discrepancies are of a similar magnitude – even if few of the relevant archives can be accessed by historians. In Pingyuan county, to take an example from the north-western part of the province, a high-ranking investigation noted that out of a population of 452,000 in 1957, over 46,000 people had died by 1961. Despite 24,000 births, the total population dropped to 371,000, as tens of thousands took to the roads to escape from famine – many to die elsewhere, their deaths being excluded from these figures. Cao Shuji's examination of the official annals proposes 19,000 premature deaths for Pingyuan county. Even if we take into account a normal death rate of 1 per cent per year over a period of four years, the total of excess deaths reported at the time would be equivalent to 28,000, or 50 per cent higher.<sup>32</sup> A similar observation can be made about Qihe, which lost a fifth of its population, or 100,000, between 1957 and 1961. If we deduct a normal death rate of 1 per cent for four years and accept that roughly half of the vanished probably migrated to other areas (the document is not clear on this issue), we are still left with a figure comparable to Pingyuan, or roughly 30,000, although Cao Shuji ventures no more than 19,000, or a third less.<sup>33</sup> For the entire Laizhou region, consisting of Qingdao and thirteen counties, Cao Shuji's estimate is 164,000 premature deaths over four years. But the archives show that in Jimo county alone, according to incomplete statistics, some 47,000 people died (excluding 51,000 farmers who took to the roads) over a period of two years. Even if we deduct 15,000 normal deaths for a population of approximately 750,000 people, it still leaves the county with 32,000 premature deaths – far above Cao Shuji's estimate.<sup>34</sup>

In some cases the archival data and the published material are in line. In Xinxing county, Guangdong, 1.5 per cent of the population died in 1959, followed by 2.88 per cent in 1960. This would have amounted to roughly 5,000 deaths, while Cao Shuji arrives at a total of 8,000 deaths for three years.<sup>35</sup> For the much larger region of Jiangmen, also in Guangdong, encompassing several counties, the death rate given to the provincial party committee was 2 per cent in 1960 (or 120,000 deaths, half of which would count as 'premature'). This is difficult to compare with Cao's reconstruction of the official data, as the administrative borders of the region were extensively redrawn after 1961, but they do seem roughly to fit his estimate of 112,000 excess deaths for three years.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Sichuan, as noted above, political pressure under Li Jingquan meant that few if any counties reported high death rates, and none match those found in the official documentation published decades later and consulted by Cao Shuji.

None of this is intended as a criticism of Cao Shuji's work: on the contrary, his painstaking reconstruction of what happened at the county level, on the basis of well over a thousand local gazetteers, has established a baseline which is very much in accord with figures derived by demographers from more abstract sets of population statistics. A systematic comparison of these figures with archival data compiled at the time or in the immediate aftermath of the famine would not be possible without his work. And when we confront the official

data with archival evidence we find a pattern of underestimation, sometimes by 30 to 50 per cent, sometimes by as much as a factor of three or four.

Perhaps some of the reports exaggerated the death rates, but it is very difficult to see why. There was no political advantage to be gained from declaring extra deaths. The death toll was not a major consideration in the purge of party members after October 1960. The manner of death mattered, as local cadres were classified according to different levels of abuse. In fact there was every advantage in inflating the overall population. When a team went to investigate the statistics in Hunan in 1964 it found that the overall population was systematically inflated by more than 1 per cent, in some counties by up to 2 or 3 per cent. The difference for 1963 was half a million people in Hunan who existed on paper alone: 'through thorough testing we found that in the past the population figures were routinely and severely inflated'.<sup>37</sup> When the Ministry of Public Security undertook a more widespread check on population statistics in 1963, it discovered a similar pattern of inflation across the country, sometimes as high as 2.2 per cent in the case of Gansu, for instance. 'Of a population of 681 million today, we estimate that about 1 to 1.5 per cent of those counted are fake. Many local cadres, in order to obtain greater cloth rations and other goods, intentionally increase the population figures.'<sup>38</sup> A year later, during the official 1964 census, the Central Census Office confirmed that 'the problem of population inflation is far worse than we thought', as at least a million was added for Hebei and Henan each, and no fewer than 700,000 for Shandong, three of the provinces that had been closely investigated: there was very little that could be done about the issue.<sup>39</sup>

Even if we ignore some of the most glaring disparities between archival data and official figures, the gap is in the order of 50 to 100 per cent. It is very difficult to venture an alternative death toll, all the more since so many of the key sets of archival statistics remain prudently under lock and key, far removed from the eyes of prying historians. But there is enough archival evidence, from a sufficiently large diversity of party units, to confirm that the figure of 43 to 46 million premature deaths proposed by Chen Yizi, who was a senior member of a large working group that sifted through internal party documents around 1980, is in all likelihood a reliable estimate. The death toll thus stands at a minimum of 45 million excess deaths.

It could be even worse than that. Some historians speculate that the true figure stands as high as 50 to 60 million people. It is unlikely that we will know the full extent of the disaster until the archives are completely opened. But these are the figures informally discussed by a number of party historians. And these are also, according to Chen Yizi, the figures cited at internal meetings of senior party members under Zhao Ziyang.<sup>40</sup> Yu Xiguang, an independent researcher with a great deal of experience, puts the figure at 55 million excess deaths.<sup>41</sup>

## Epilogue

The turning point came in January 1962, as 7,000 cadres arrived from all parts of the country to attend the largest work conference ever held in the vast, modernistic Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Liu Shaoqi, the head of state, issued the official report to a packed audience, speaking for three hours without a break – but not without interruption. He did not confront Mao directly, which would have been unthinkable, but he openly repeated everything he had said behind closed doors to a small gathering of senior leaders half a year earlier. In Hunan, he explained, the farmers believed that the ‘difficulties’ were due 30 per cent to natural calamities and 70 per cent to a man-made disaster. The very use of the term ‘man-made disaster’ (renhuo) was a bombshell, drawing gasps from the audience. As Liu proceeded to dismiss the expression ‘nine fingers to one’, Mao’s favourite phrase to emphasise achievements over setbacks, the tension became palpable. ‘In general our successes have been primary, shortcomings and errors are secondary, they occupy a second position. I wonder if we can say that, generally speaking, the ratio of achievements to setbacks is seven to three, although each region is different. One finger versus nine fingers does not apply to every place. There are only a small number of regions where mistakes are equal to one finger and successes equal to nine fingers.’ Mao interrupted Liu, visibly annoyed: ‘It’s not a small number of regions at all, for instance in Hebei only 20 per cent of regions decreased production and in Jiangsu 30 per cent of all regions increased production year after year!’ But Liu refused to be intimidated, and carried on: ‘In general, we cannot say it is merely one finger, but rather three, and in some places it is even more, for instance in the Xinyang region [in Henan] or in the Tianshui region [in Gansu].’ And who was responsible for this disaster? Liu squarely placed the blame on the central leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Liu did try to appease the Chairman by defending the general party line, postponing the verdict over the communes to five or maybe even ten years later. But Mao was furious nonetheless. ‘He talks about natural disasters versus man-made disasters. This kind of talk is a disaster in itself,’ he confided to his doctor.<sup>2</sup>

Lin Biao, the general who had rallied to the defence of the Chairman at the Lushan plenum in 1959, again lauded the Great Leap Forward, hailed as an unprecedented accomplishment when compared to any other period of the country’s history. He rhapsodised: ‘The thoughts of Chairman Mao are always correct . . . Chairman Mao’s superiority has many aspects, not just one, and I know from experience that Chairman Mao’s most outstanding quality is realism. What he says is much more realistic than what others say. He is always pretty close to the mark. He is never out of touch with reality . . . I feel very deeply that when in the past our work was done well, it was precisely when we thoroughly implemented and did not interfere with Chairman Mao’s thought. Every time Chairman Mao’s ideas were not sufficiently respected or suffered interference, there have been problems. That is essentially what the history of our party over the last few decades shows.’<sup>3</sup>

Zhou Enlai did what he always managed best. He tried to absolve Mao by assuming much of the blame for what had gone wrong, taking personal responsibility for excessive grain procurements, inflated production figures, the draining of grain away from the provinces and growing exports of food. ‘This is my mistake,’ he declared, going on to claim that the ‘shortcomings and errors of the last few years have occurred precisely when we contravened the general line and Chairman Mao’s precious instructions’.<sup>4</sup> He was trying to build a bridge across the gap that had opened between Mao and Liu, but it was to no avail.

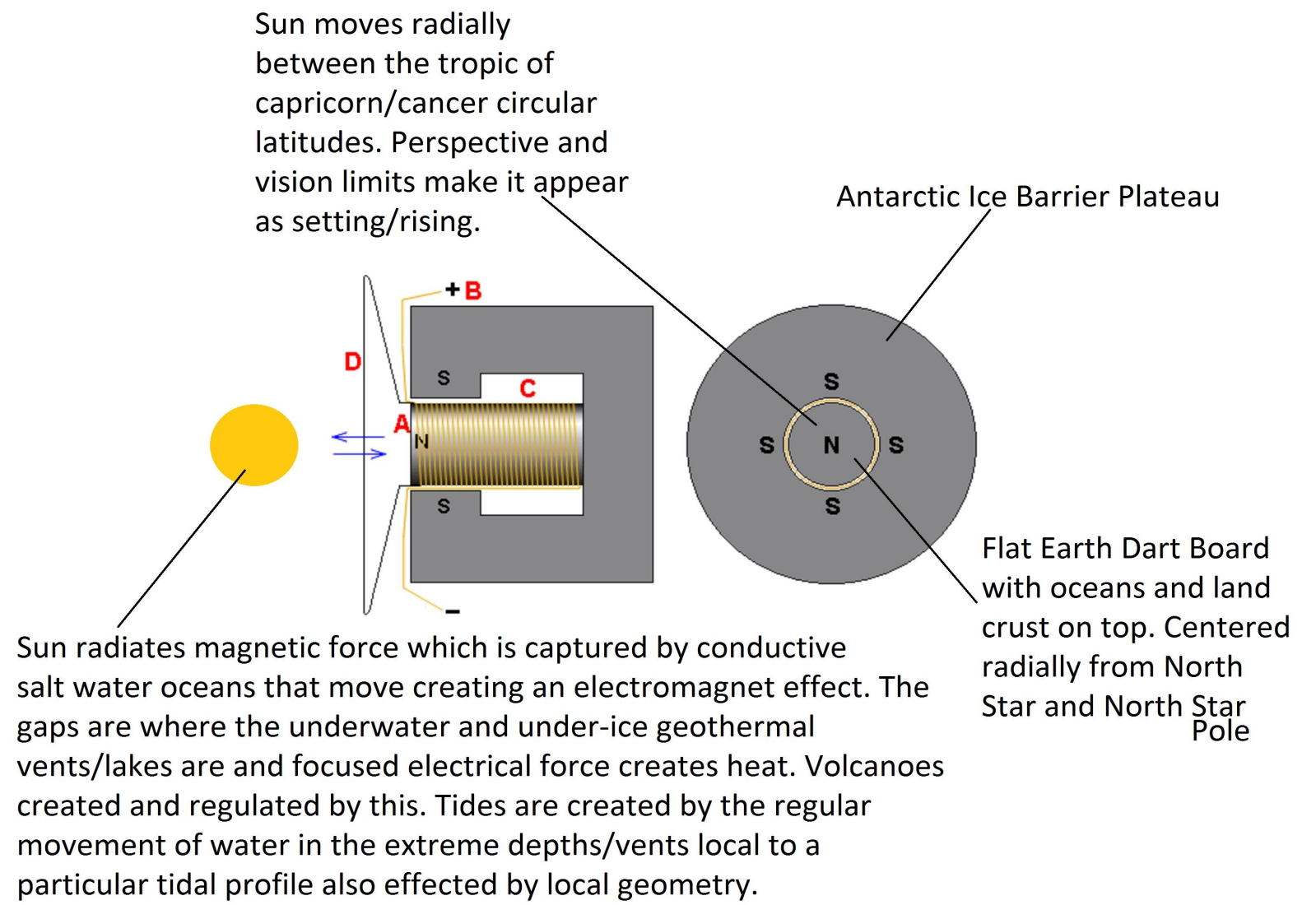
We will never know when Mao decided to get rid of Liu, setting in motion a Cultural Revolution that would destroy the lives of all those who had opposed him during the Great Leap Forward. But a good guess is that he started plotting the elimination of his ever more threatening nemesis as soon as he realised that his entire legacy as well as his standing in history was at stake.

The defining moment may have been a summer afternoon in July 1962, when Mao was floating in his swimming pool. He had been urgently called back to Beijing by Liu, and the Chairman was in a foul mood. Liu’s son recalls that his father hurriedly approached the Chairman, having been summoned to explain what the rush was all about. Liu started by reporting that Chen Yun and Tian Jiaying, two of the most outspoken critics of the Great Leap Forward, wanted formally to present their views about land distribution. Mao soon exploded into a torrent of invective. But Liu would not desist. He spoke in haste: ‘So many people have died of hunger!’ Then he blurted out, ‘History will judge you and me, even cannibalism will go into the books!’

Mao went into a towering rage. ‘The Three Red Banners have been shot down, now land is being divided up again,’ he shouted ‘What have you done to resist this? What’s going to happen after I’m dead?’



The two men soon calmed down, and Mao agreed that an economic policy of adjustment should continue.<sup>5</sup> But the Chairman was now convinced that he had found his Khrushchev, the servant who had denounced his master Stalin. Liu, he concluded, was obviously the man who would issue a secret speech denouncing all his crimes. Mao was biding his time, but the patient groundwork for launching a Cultural Revolution that would tear the party and the country apart had already begun.



***No photographs other than those taken for propaganda purposes are known to exist from the years of the famine.***

Chairman Mao pensively overlooks the Yellow River in 1952. A large dam was built in 1958–60 to attempt to tame the river known as 'China's Sorrow', but, as with many dams and dykes all over the country built during the Great Leap Forward, it was so poorly designed that it had to be rebuilt at huge expense.





**khruhchev's real name was pearl-mutter, he was a crypto-jew. Every leader of the USSR and others, like Castro, have been at a minimum crypto-jews. Mao may have been crypto of the tio-kio ancient jewish community. Today Red China is fully controlled by ethnic chinese crypto-jews. New York, Moscow, Beijing, Tel Aviv, modern capitals of judaeo-masonry.**

Mao and Khrushchev at the Kremlin in November 1957. Mao saw himself as the leader of the socialist camp and believed that the Great Leap Forward would allow China to forge ahead and make the transition from socialism to communism, leaving the Soviet Union far behind.





On 25 May 1958 Chairman Mao galvanises the nation by appearing at the Ming Tomb Reservoir to help move earth (the original photo also shows Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, but he was later airbrushed out of the picture).



Building a cofferdam of straw and mud to divert the Yellow River at the Qingtong Gorge in Gansu, December 1958. Forced labour on water conservancy schemes all over the country claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of exhausted villagers already weakened by hunger.



The people of Beijing collect scrap iron in July 1958. In a frenzy to produce more steel, everybody was required to offer pots, pans, tools, even door knobs and window frames to feed the backyard furnaces, which more often than not produced useless lumps of pig iron.



Breaking stones for the backyard furnaces in Baofeng county, Henan, October 1958. To fuel the furnaces, the forests were denuded of trees while many houses in the countryside were stripped of wood.



Carrying fertiliser to the fields in a spirit of competitive emulation, Huaxian county, Henan, April 1959. Attempts to set new agricultural records encouraged a scramble for fertiliser, as every conceivable kind of nutrient was thrown onto the fields, from animal manure to human hair. Everywhere buildings made of mud and straw were torn down to provide fertiliser for the soil, leaving many villagers homeless.





Chairman Mao inspecting an experimental plot with close cropping in the suburbs of Tianjin in August 1958. Close cropping, whereby seeds were sown far more densely than was usual, was seen as a cornerstone of innovative tilling, but the experiment only contributed to a famine of unprecedented proportions.



A bumper harvest of sugar cane in Guangxi province, November 1959. During the Great Leap Forward reports came in from all over the country of new records in cotton, rice, wheat or peanut production, although most of the crops existed on paper only.



On the right, Li Jingquan, leader of Sichuan province where more than 10 million people died prematurely during the famine, shows off a model farm in Pixian county, March 1958.



Chairman Mao on a visit to Wuhan in April 1958, with Hubei provincial leader Wang Renzhong on the right of the photo; Shanghai mayor Ke Qingshi, also a staunch supporter of the Great Leap Forward, appears on the left behind Marxist philosopher Li Da, standing in the middle.



Peng Dehuai, who would speak out against the Great Leap Forward at the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959, meets with party activists in December 1958.



Tan Zhenlin, a close follower of Mao and in charge of agriculture, addresses a party conference in October 1958.

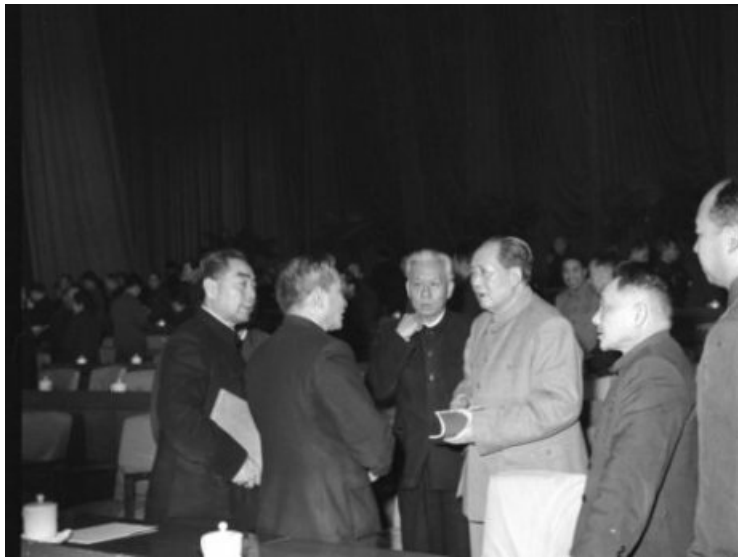




Li Fuchun, the top official in charge of economic planning, meets several cadres in the suburbs of Tianjin, autumn of 1958.



Liu Shaoqi tours the countryside in his home province of Hunan and discovers the extent of the famine in April 1961.



From left to right, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun, Liu Shaoqi, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping at the party conference in January 1962, dubbed the Seven Thousand Cadres Assembly, at which Liu openly blames 'human errors' rather than nature for the catastrophe.



## An Essay on the Sources

The bulk of the sources come from party archives in China, and a few words about these may help the reader better to understand the foundation on which the book rests. In a one-party state, archives do not belong to the public, they belong to the party. They are often housed in a special building on the local party committee premises, which are generally set among lush and lovingly manicured grounds closely guarded by military personnel. Access to the archives is strictly regulated and would have been unthinkable until a decade or so ago, but over the past few years increasing quantities of documents older than thirty years have become available for consultation to readers with a letter of recommendation. The extent and quality of the material vary from place to place, but in general most collections distinguish between 'open', or declassified, and 'closed', or controlled files, as truly sensitive material remains out of bounds except to the eyes of the most senior party members. The very fact that this distinction removes from the scrutiny of most historians a large proportion of vital information indicates that this book has been written with relatively 'soft' material: future historians, hopefully, will be able to reveal the true scale of what happened on the basis of fully open archives.

Another complication presents itself in the fact that, with the exception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, most central archives are extremely difficult to access. Most historians tend to rely on provincial and county collections instead. Although a good dozen city and county archives have been used in this work, the majority of the material comes from ten provincial archives (listed in the Select Bibliography), which were chosen largely on the basis of openness. Until now no historian, to my knowledge, has been able to work on the Maoist era in the Anhui provincial archives, while the collection in Henan also remains highly restricted, to the point where even if access were granted it would remain rather meaningless, as only the most banal documents would be handed over to the researcher, often in painfully small quantities. Other collections, by contrast, have been gradually opening up, and my selection represents a good spread of provinces in terms of population density (Shandong versus Gansu), severity of the famine (Sichuan on one extreme, Zhejiang on the other) and geography (from Hebei in the north to Guangdong in the south).

The archives inside each provincial collection reflect the structure of the party machinery and are often divided into smaller groups according to the institution they belonged to – for instance the Bureau for Hygiene or the Bureau for Forestry. What the historian finds, then, is often extremely diverse material, far more so than the stark term 'archives' actually suggests. There are letters written by ordinary people, surveys of working conditions in factories by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, investigations into cases of corruption, Bureau of Public Security reports of theft, murder, arson and assault on granaries, detailed evidence of local cadre abuses compiled by special teams sent in during rectification campaigns, general reports on peasant resistance during the collectivisation campaign, secret opinion surveys and much more.

The huge variety of material is nonetheless of official provenance. Even the letters written by ordinary farmers and workers would have been selected for some official purpose, and we have little alternative but to view everyday life through the prism of the state. This observation, of course, is true for all state archives, including those of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. It does not mean that we cannot read them against the grain. Finally, any historian worth his salt will know how to assess the authorship of official reports, their intended audience, the institutional context which engendered them and the conditions of their production. Historians are attuned to the complications which result from the distortion of social reality by official rhetoric, as terms such as 'sabotage', 'slacking', 'treason', 'enemy of the people' and 'leftist excesses' obscure what happened. Yet the sheer variety and abundance of reports about resistance demonstrate the persistence of rural strategies of survival, while the state itself was a complex, sprawling organisation which hardly ever spoke – or reported – with one voice. Just as senior leaders such as Peng Dehuai and Mao Zedong clashed in their findings about the Great Leap Forward, different individuals, units and organisations varied enormously in how they reported what they found on the ground.

Provincial archives are not only much richer than the smaller collections which can be found in counties, cities or even villages, but they also tend to keep copies of important files that were sent to them from above, namely Beijing, or from below, for instance when counties reported on important matters such as grain shortages or the collapse of a dam. In the bureaucratic maze of communist China, a document was hardly ever 'unique', in the sense that copies were made and circulated to many institutions who might have claimed a stake in the case at

hand. Many of the reports compiled by work teams, for instance, would have been sent to several dozen party members. An important central document was distributed to every province and county, while more sensitive material might have been copied only to the first secretaries of each province. In other words, a wealth of material which does not necessarily pertain to the region in question can be found in provincial collections, including minutes of speeches and gatherings at the highest level. These minutes can vary considerably, as they were taken by different people, sometimes from tape recordings. Some are more detailed than others. I have tried to make it as easy as possible for the interested reader to find out the provenance of each document. In the Notes the first number in the archival location data refers to the general collection, the name of which is provided in the list of archives at the end of this book. As an example, 'Hunan, 6 Oct. 1962, 207-1-750, pp. 44–9' indicates that the document is contained in a file from the Hunan provincial archives in collection 207, which stands for the Bureau for Water Conservancy and Hydroelectricity.

What happened at the highest level, inside the corridors of power in Beijing? So far, to understand court politics under Mao most historians have relied on official publications, internal documents (*neibu*) or Red Guard material released during the Cultural Revolution. In contrast I prefer to use archival material as far as possible, and I do so for three reasons. First, entire sentences or sections have been omitted from the published speeches of senior leaders, in particular, but not only, in Red Guard material. There are countless examples of small stylistic changes or more profound editorial excisions, and they change the overall sense of many of these speeches. Second, the minutes of entire meetings have been censored, either officially in the mainland or in the Red Guard material smuggled out of China during the Cultural Revolution. And third, while historians have given much weight to meetings on which leading party members have later commented, crucial events and decisions have simply been ignored or censored, even in the otherwise very reliable official biographies of leaders published by party historians with access to the Central Archives in Beijing. This is the case, as we have seen, with the meeting at the Jinjiang Hotel in Shanghai on 25 March 1959 at which Mao suggested that a third of all grain should be procured to meet foreign commitments.

In short, the entire record of the Maoist era, as reflected in official and internally published sources, is a skilful exercise in obfuscation and, as such, an inadequate basis for historical research. This rather sceptical view is confirmed by a recent biography of Zhou Enlai by Gao Wenqian. Gao, a party historian who worked in the Central Archives in Beijing for many years, smuggled out his notes before absconding to the United States. The premier described in Gao's groundbreaking biography is substantially different from the iconic figure most of us are used to (Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2007). However, while bearing these shortcomings in mind, anything published by the Central Documents Research Office (*Zhongyang wenxian yanjiu shi*), including their voluminous and carefully referenced biographies of leaders, is invaluable. The problem with these publications is the vast amount of crucial information that has been deliberately excluded, and the same can be said of the post-1949 manuscripts of Mao published in a dozen volumes as *Mao Zedong, Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's manuscripts since the founding of the People's Republic), Beijing: *Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe*, 1987–96.

China, like all communist states, has a sprawling bureaucracy in which obsessive attention to the most minute details – even in the midst of widespread want – can reach absurd dimensions, but not every scrap of paper ends up carefully preserved in an archive. Factories, government units, even the courts and the police sometimes dispose of their files, for instance when they move to new quarters. Some of these documents – confessions, reports, directives, permits and certificates of every sort – end up in the delightfully chaotic flea markets of Guangzhou, Shanghai or Beijing. Over many a weekend, as the archives are closed, I have sifted through dusty papers: some of these were in bundles spread on a blanket, with the owner squatting on a pile of old newspapers; others were displayed on makeshift tables among memorabilia, postcards, magazines and stamps. I have built up a small collection of documents (as well as a pile of ration coupons of every shade and colour, since they are one of the very few artefacts of bureaucracy to have survived the famine), but have quoted very few of them, and then only when no equivalent exists in the official party archives.

A small proportion of the evidence comes from foreign archives, in particular Russian and East German, the two countries that were most closely involved with China at the time. All in all, they are helpful in reconstructing the foreign trade and policy aspects of the era, although they are much more limited when it comes to observations about everyday life. Most advisers were confined to the cities, and by 1960 even the East Germans – who remained sympathetic to the Great Leap Forward for much longer than other Eastern Europeans – were leaving in droves. A few snippets can be gleaned from reports to London, although overall the fabled sinologists in the British embassy were pretty clueless – and poorly prepared too, without any apparent knowledge of



collectivisation and its effects. A low-ranking scribbler with experience of the Soviet Union would have done a better job. Very much the opposite could be said of the staff of the secret services in Taiwan, who compiled extremely detailed and insightful reports about every aspect of the famine for Chiang Kai-shek and a select few of his acolytes in regular intelligence bulletins, which can be found in the Bureau of Investigation in Hsin-tien, on the outskirts of Taipei. The United States refused to believe Chiang Kai-shek (as CIA reports show), no doubt fearing that the Generalissimo might drag them into an invasion of the mainland. However, since the party archives in China are much more reliable, I have not used this material at all.

Several times a week the official press agency Xinhua compiled a report three to ten pages long called Internal Reference (Neibu cankao) which was distributed to officials at the ministerial level and higher. This source pales in comparison with the archival material, as it was heavily censored, but nonetheless contains interesting snippets of information. Finally, some of the memoirs and personal recollections of party members, interpreters, secretaries and diplomats can be useful, although many suffer from self-censorship and lack of concrete detail. Pride of place should be given to Mao's personal physician Li Zhisui. Much maligned by some sinologists for being too 'sensational', he is a very reliable guide whose recollections can be verified, sometimes almost verbatim, in the party archives (an observation also confirmed by Lorenz Lüthi, who worked extensively with Soviet documents; see Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 354).

I have used a small number of interviews to give a voice occasionally to ordinary people – although, of course, they speak loudly and volubly in many a party document, from opinion surveys to police reports. About a hundred interviews were conducted by researchers specifically trained for this project by me over several years, often in the format of what specialists refer to as 'insider interviewing', meaning that interviewers spoke with people from the same social background in their own dialect, sometimes from the same village or even family, cutting out both the presence of an alien interviewer (foreign or urban Chinese) and a translator. All these interviews have been transcribed and deposited with the Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. All the names of the interviewees, as well as those of a very small number of people who may still be alive, have been anonymised.

Finally, a short word about secondary sources. While for many decades the best specialists on the Maoist era were to be found in Europe, the United States and Japan, the centre of gravity has decidedly moved back to China. A small but growing body of work has been published on the famine by historians who have spent time in very different archival collections. Their publications are not always welcome in China, and more often than not appear in Hong Kong – a city which is rapidly emerging, once again, as the key interface between the mainland and the rest of the world. Yu Xiguang is the historian with by far the most experience in teasing out vital information from the archives, as is made clear by his superb anthology (Yu Xiguang, *Dayuejin ku rizi: Shangshuji* [The Great Leap Forward and the years of bitterness: A collection of memorials], Hong Kong: Shidai chaoliu chubanshe, 2005). Special mention must be made of Yang Jisheng, a retired journalist who was one of the first to use archival collections from the provinces (Yang Jisheng, *Mubei: Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi* [Gravestone: A true history of the Great Famine in China in the 1960s], Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 2008). His work remains important, in particular in so far as few other historians have been able to research and publish on the famine in Henan province. But his two volumes do suffer from a number of serious shortcomings. Those familiar with the material will see that the book is more of a compilation of notes from different sources than a carefully constructed text. At times it looks like a hotchpotch which simply strings together large chunks of text, some lifted from the Web, a few from published sources, and others transcribed from archival material. Invaluable documents are thrown together with irrelevant anecdotes, making it difficult for the reader to see the wood for the trees. In some cases the author spent only a day or two in the archives, missing the most vital, and openly available, documents. This is the case for the chapter on Guangdong, which relies on a single file for the entire famine. But most of all there is no time line: by dispensing with a meaningful historical narrative and focusing heavily on grain shortages, the author misses an important dimension of the disaster. More solid is Lin Yunhui's magisterial book, essential in tracing the development of the Great Leap Forward. While it relies for the greatest part on published sources and is concerned solely with court politics, its sheer scope and breadth of analysis supersede all other books in political science on the topic (Lin Yunhui, *Wutuobang yundong: Cong dayuejin dao dajihuang, 1958–1961* [Utopian movement: From the Great Leap Forward to the Great Famine, 1958–61], Hong Kong: Xianggang zhongwen daxue dangdai Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu zhongxin, 2008). Last but not least, Gao Wangling's work on peasant forms of resistance during the famine is a model of originality and insight, and it has been a major inspiration for this book (Gao Wangling,

Renmin gongshe shiqi Zhongguo nongmin 'fan-xingwei' diaocha [Acts of peasant resistance in China during the people's communes], Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2006).

In English much of the literature on the famine now looks rather dated, but readers interested in elite politics will still enjoy reading Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Great Leap Forward, 1958–1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. More recent is Alfred Chan, whose analysis of how Mao's vision was actually implemented in Guangdong remains unsurpassed (Alfred L. Chan, *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). There are some good village studies based on interviews, although of course they tend to rely on the words of those who survived, leaving the dead without a voice. A recent example is Ralph A. Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward, Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Jasper Becker's account of the famine remains very readable (Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*, New York: Henry Holt, 1996). Other authors whose work has touched on the famine include David Bachman, *Bureaucracy, Economy, and Leadership in China: The Institutional Origins of the Great Leap Forward*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; Thomas P. Bernstein, 'Mao Zedong and the Famine of 1959–1960: A Study in Wilfulness', *China Quarterly*, no. 186 (June 2006), pp. 421–45 and 'Stalinism, Famine and Chinese Peasants: Grain Procurements during the Great Leap Forward', *Theory and Society*, vol. 13 (May 1984), pp. 339–77; Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden with Kay Ann Johnson, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991; Jean-Luc Domenach, *The Origins of the Great Leap Forward: The Case of One Chinese Province*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995; Penny Kane, *Famine in China, 1959–61: Demographic and Social Implications*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3: *The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–1966*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955–1959*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999; Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Other helpful studies are listed in the Select Bibliography.

# Select Bibliography

## Archives

### Non-Chinese Archives

AVPRF – Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow, Russia  
BArch – Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany  
ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, Switzerland  
MfAA – Politische Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Germany  
PRO – National Archives, London, United Kingdom  
PRO, Hong Kong – Public Record Office, Hong Kong  
RGAE – Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki, Moscow, Russia  
RGANI – Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii, Moscow, Russia

### Central Archives

Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Wajiaobu Dang'anguan, Beijing

### Provincial Archives

#### Gansu – Gansu sheng dang'anguan, Lanzhou

91 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei (Gansu Provincial Party Committee)  
96 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Gansu Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)

#### Guangdong – Guangdong sheng dang'anguan, Guangzhou

216 Guangdong shengwei tongzhanbu (Guangdong Provincial Party Committee Office for the United Front)  
217 Guangdong sheng nongcunbu (Guangdong Provincial Bureau for Rural Affairs)  
218 Guangdong sheng gongyebu (Guangdong Province Bureau for Industry)  
231 Guangdong sheng zonggonghui (Guangdong Province Federation of Trade Unions)  
235 Guangdong sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Guangdong Provincial People's Congress)  
253 Guangdong sheng jihua weiyuanhui (Guangdong Province Planning Committee)  
262 Guangdong sheng yinglinbu (Guangdong Province Bureau for Forestry)  
266 Guangdong sheng shuidianbu (Guangdong Province Bureau for Water Conservancy and Hydroelectricity)  
300 Guangdong sheng tongjiju (Guangdong Province Office for Statistics)  
307 Guangdong sheng wenhuaju (Guangdong Province Office for Culture)  
314 Guangdong sheng jiaoyuting (Guangdong Province Bureau for Education)  
317 Guangdong sheng weishengting (Guangdong Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

#### Guangxi – Guangxi sheng dang'anguan, Nanning

X1 Zhonggong Guangxi shengwei (Guangxi Provincial Party Committee)

#### Guizhou – Guizhou sheng dang'anguan, Guiyang

90 Zhonggong Guizhou sheng nongyeting (Guizhou Province Agricultural Bureau)

#### Hebei – Hebei sheng dang'anguan, Shijiazhuang

855 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei (Hebei Provincial Party Committee)  
856 Zhonggong Hebei shengjiwei (Hebei Provincial Committee for Inspecting Discipline)  
878 Shengwei shenghuo bangongshi (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Office for Daily Life)  
879 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)  
880 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei nongcun zhengfeng zhengshe bangongshi (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Office for Rectification in the Countryside)  
884 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei zhengfa weiyuanhui (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Commission on Political and Legal Affairs)  
979 Hebei sheng nongyeting (Hebei Province Agricultural Bureau)

#### Hubei – Hubei sheng dang'anguan, Wuhan

SZ1 Zhonggong Hubei sheng weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial Party Committee)  
SZ18 Zhonggong Hubei sheng weiyuanhui nongcun zhengzhibu (Hubei Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Politics)  
SZ29 Hubei sheng zonggonghui (Hubei Province Federation of Trade Unions)  
SZ34 Hubei sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial People's Congress)  
SZ113 Hubei sheng shuiliting (Hubei Province Bureau for Water Conservancy)  
SZ115 Hubei sheng weishengting (Hubei Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

#### Hunan – Hunan sheng dang'anguan, Changsha

141 Zhonggong Hunan sheng weiyuanhui (Hunan Provincial Party Committee)  
146 Zhonggong Hunan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Hunan Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)

151 Zhonggong Hunan shengwei zhengce yanjiushi (Hunan Provincial Party Committee Office for Policy Research)  
163 Hunan sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Hunan Provincial People's Congress)  
186 Hunan sheng jihua weiyuanhui (Hunan Province Planning Committee)  
187 Hunan sheng tongjiju (Hunan Province Statistics Office)  
207 Hunan sheng shuili shuidianting (Hunan Province Bureau for Water Conservancy and Hydroelectricity)  
265 Hunan sheng weisheng fangyiting (Hunan Province Bureau for Health and Epidemic Prevention)

**Shandong – Shandong sheng dang’anguan, Jinan**

A1 Zhonggong Shandong shengwei (Shandong Provincial Party Committee)

**Sichuan – Sichuan sheng dang’anguan, Chengdu**

JC1 Shengwei bangongting (Office of the Provincial Party Committee)  
JC12 Sichuan shengwei mingongwei (Sichuan Provincial Party Committee on Ethnic Affairs)  
JC44 Sichuan sheng minzhengting (Sichuan Province Bureau for Civil Affairs)  
JC50 Sichuan sheng renwei zongjiao shiwuchu (Office for Religious Affairs of the Sichuan Provincial People's Congress)  
JC67 Sichuan shengwei tongjiju (Sichuan Province Statistics Office)  
JC133 Sichuan sheng weishengting (Sichuan Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

**Yunnan – Yunnan sheng dang’anguan, Kunming**

2 Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei (Yunnan Provincial Party Committee)  
11 Zhonggong Yunnan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Yunnan Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)  
81 Yunnan sheng tongjiju (Yunnan Province Statistics Office)  
105 Yunnan sheng shuili shuidianting (Yunnan Province Bureau for Water Conservancy and Hydroelectricity)  
120 Yunnan sheng langshiting (Yunnan Province Bureau for Grain)

**Zhejiang – Zhejiang sheng dang’anguan, Hangzhou**

J002 Zhonggong Zhejiang shengwei (Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee)  
J007 Zhejiang shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee's Department for Rural Work)  
J116 Zhejiang sheng nongyeting (Zhejiang Province Bureau for Agriculture)  
J132 Zhejiang sheng langshiting (Zhejiang Province Bureau for Grain)  
J165 Zhejiang sheng weishengting (Zhejiang Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

**County and City Archives**

**Beijing – Beijing shi dang’anguan, Beijing**

1 Beijing shi weiyuanhui (Beijing Municipal Party Committee)  
2 Beijing shi renmin weiyuanhui (Beijing Municipal People's Congress)  
84 Beijing shi funü lianhehui (Beijing Municipal Women's Federation)  
92 Beijing shi nonglinju (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Agriculture and Forestry)  
96 Beijing shi shuili qixiangju (Beijing Municipal Bureau for Water Conservancy and Meteorology)  
101 Beijing shi zonggonghui (Beijing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions)

**Chishui – Chishui shi dang’anguan, Chishui, Guizhou**

1 Chishui shiwei (Chishui Municipal Party Committee)

**Fuyang – Fuyang shi dang’anguan, Fuyang, Anhui**

J3 Fuyang shiwei (Fuyang Municipal Party Committee)

**Guangzhou – Guangzhou shi dang’anguan, Guangzhou, Guangdong**

6 Guangzhou shiwei xuanchuanbu (Guangzhou Municipal Party Committee's Bureau for Propaganda)  
13 Guangzhou shi nongcun gongzuobu (Guangzhou Municipal Party Committee's Department for Rural Work)  
16 Guangzhou shiwei jiedao gongzuobu (Guangzhou Municipal Party Committee's Task Unit on Neighbourhoods)  
69 Guangzhou shiwei gangtie shengchan zhihubu bangongshi (Bureau of the Municipal Party Committee's Headquarters for Steel Production)  
92 Guangzhou shi zonggonghui (Guangzhou Municipal Federation of Trade Unions)  
94 Guangzhou shi funü lianhehui (Guangzhou Municipal Women's Federation)  
97 Guangzhou shi renmin weiyuanhui bangongting (Office of the Guangzhou Municipal People's Congress)  
176 Guangzhou shi weishengju (Guangzhou Municipal Bureau for Health and Hygiene)

**Guiyang – Guiyang shi dang’anguan, Guiyang, Guizhou**

61 Zhonggong Guiyang shiwei (Guiyang Municipal Party Committee)

**Kaiping – Kaiping shi dang’anguan, Kaiping, Guangdong**

3 Kaiping shiwei (Kaiping Municipal Party Committee)

**Macheng – Macheng shi dang’anguan, Macheng, Hubei**

1 Macheng xianwei (Macheng County Party Committee)

**Nanjing – Nanjing shi dang’anguan, Nanjing, Jiangsu**

- 4003 Nanjing shiwei (Nanjing Municipal Party Committee)
- 4053 Nanjing shiwei chengshi renmin gongshe lingdao xiaozu bangongshi (Nanjing Municipal Party Committee Office of the Group Leading the Urban Communes)
- 5003 Nanjing shi renmin zhengfu (Nanjing Municipal People’s Government)
- 5012 Nanjing shi minzhengju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Civil Affairs)
- 5035 Nanjing shi zhonggongyeju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Heavy Industry)
- 5040 Nanjing shi shougongyeju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Handicraft Industry)
- 5065 Nanjing shi weishengju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Health and Hygiene)
- 6001 Nanjing shi zonggonghui (Nanjing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions)

**Shanghai – Shanghai shi dang’anguan, Shanghai**

- A2 Shanghai shiwei bangongting (Office of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee)
- A20 Shanghai shiwei linong gongzuo weiyuanhui (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s Committee on Neighbourhood Work)
- A23 Shanghai shiwei jiaoyu weishengbu (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s Bureau for Education and Health)
- A36 Shanghai shiwei gongye zhengzhibu (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s Bureau for Industry and Politics)
- A70 Shanghai shiwei nongcun gongzuobu (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s Department for Rural Work)
- A72 Shanghai shiwei nongcun gongzuo weiyuanhui (Committee for Rural Work of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee)
- B29 Shanghai shi jingji jihua weiyuanhui (Shanghai Municipal Committee for Economic Planning)
- B31 Shanghai shi tongjiju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Statistics)
- B112 Shanghai shi yejin gongyeju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Metallurgy)
- B123 Shanghai shi diyi shangyeju (Shanghai Municipal First Commercial Bureau)
- B242 Shanghai shi weishengju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Health)

**Suiping – Suiping shi dang’anguan, Suiping, Henan**

- 1 Suiping xianwei (Suiping County Party Committee)

**Wuhan – Wuhan shi dang’anguan, Wuhan, Hubei**

- 13 Wuhan shi renmin zhengfu (Wuhan Municipal People’s Government)
- 28 Wuhan shi Jiang’anqu weiyuanhui (Wuhan Committee on Jiang’an District)
- 30 Wuhan shi Jianghanqu weiyuanhui (Wuhan Committee on Jianghan District)
- 70 Wuhan shi jiaoyuting (Wuhan Municipal Bureau for Education)
- 71 Wuhan shi weishengju (Wuhan Municipal Bureau for Health and Hygiene)
- 76 Wuhan shi gongshang guanliju (Wuhan Municipal Bureau for the Administration of Industry and Commerce)
- 83 Wuhan shi minzhengju (Wuhan Municipal Bureau for Civil Affairs)

**Wujiang – Wujiang xian dang’anguan, Wujiang, Jiangsu**

- 1001 Wujiang xianwei bangongshi (Office of the Wujiang County Party Committee)

**Wuxi – Wuxi shi dang’anguan, Wuxi, Jiangsu**

- B1 Wuxi xianwei bangongshi (Office of the Wuxi County Party Committee)

**Wuxian – Wuxian xian dang’anguan, Wuxian, Jiangsu**

- 300 Wuxian xianwei bangongshi (Office of the Wuxian County Party Committee)

**Xinyang – Xinyang xian dang’anguan, Xinyang, Henan**

- 229 and 304 Xinyang xianwei (Xinyang County Party Committee)

**Xuancheng – Xuancheng xian dang’anguan, Xuancheng, Anhui**

- 3 Xuancheng xianwei bangongshi (Office of the Xuancheng County Party Committee)

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## Preface

- 1 This has been known for some time thanks to the work of Alfred L. Chan, *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; see also Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955–1959*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999.
- 2 The most recent village study is Ralph A. Thaxton, *Catastrophe and Contention in Rural China: Mao's Great Leap Forward Famine and the Origins of Righteous Resistance in Da Fo Village*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008; a classic study is Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden with Kay Ann Johnson, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- 3 Robert Service, *Comrades: A History of World Communism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 6.

## Chapter 1: Two Rivals

- 1 William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and his Era*, London: The Free Press, 2003, p. 230.
- 2 Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji (eds), *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976* (A bio-graphy of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003, p. 534.
- 3 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*, New York: Random House, 1994, pp. 182–4.
- 4 A helpful overview of the Socialist High Tide appears in Chan, *Mao's Crusade*, pp. 17–24.
- 5 Wu Lengxi, *Yi Mao zhuxi: Wo qinshen jingli de ruogan zhongda lishi shijian pianduan* (Remembering Chairman Mao: Fragments of my personal experience of certain important historical events), Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1995, p. 57.
- 6 Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 71–2.
- 7 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 1: *Contradictions among the People, 1956–1957*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 313–15.

## Chapter 2: The Bidding Starts

- 1 Wu Lengxi, *Shinian lunzhan: 1956–1966 Zhong Su guanxi huiyilu* (Ten years of theoretical disputes: My recollection of Sino-Soviet relationships), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1999, pp. 205–6; see also Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 74.
- 2 Li, *Private Life of Chairman Mao*, pp. 220–1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 4 Mao Zedong, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's manuscripts since the founding of the People's Republic), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1987–96, vol. 6, pp. 625–6.
- 5 See the reminiscences of one of Mao's translators, Li Yueran, *Waijiao wutai-shang de xin Zhongguo lingxiu* (The leaders of new China on the diplomatic scene), Beijing: Waiyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu chubanshe, 1994, p. 137; see also Yan Mingfu, 'Huiyi liangci Mosike huiyi he Hu Qiaomu' (Recollecting Hu Qiaomu attending two Moscow conferences), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, no. 19 (May 1997), pp. 6–21.
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- 7 Veljko Mićunović, *Moscow Diary*, New York: Doubleday, 1980, p. 322.
- 8 Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 6, pp. 640–3.
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- 10 Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 6, p. 635.
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- 15 Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 6, p. 635.

## Chapter 3: Purging the Ranks

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- 3 *Renmin ribao*, 1 Jan. 1958, p. 1; Wu, *Yi Mao zhuxi*, p. 47.
- 4 *Renmin ribao*, 8 Dec. 1957, p. 1.
- 5 *Renmin ribao*, 25 Jan. 1958, p. 2.
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- 7 Minutes of Nanning meeting, *Gansu*, 28 Jan. 1958, 91-4-107, p. 1.

- 8 Li Rui, *Dayuejin qin liji* (A witness account of the Great Leap Forward), Haikou: Nanfang chubanshe, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 68–9.
- 9 At the time the editorial was published in June 1956, Deng Tuo was the editor of the People's Daily; he was replaced by Wu Lengxi in July 1957 and dismissed in November 1958, although he continued to write in support of the Great Leap Forward for several years; Wu, *Yi Mao zhuxi*, pp. 47–9; on Deng Tuo see Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
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- 12 Xiong Huayuan and Liao Xinwen, *Zhou Enlai zongli shengya* (The life of Zhou Enlai), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1997, p. 241.
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- 17 Mao's speech on 10 March 1958 at Chengdu, Gansu, 91-18-495, p. 211.
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- [20](#) Guangdong, 31 Dec. 1960, 217-1-576, pp. 54–68.
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[28](#) Shanghai, 12 March 1959, B98-1-439, pp. 9–13.

[29](#) Yunnan, 16 May 1959, 81-4-25, p. 2.

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[32](#) Yunnan, 21 April 1958, 2-1-3260, p. 116.

[33](#) These can only be very rough approximations, and they varied from place to place: in Hunan the number of people who did not engage in agricultural tasks increased by 40 per cent after 1958; Hunan, 4 June 1959, 146-1-483, p. 116; in Shandong only 50 per cent of the workforce worked in the fields: talk by Tan Zhenlin, Gansu, 26 June 1959, 91-18-513, p. 16.

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[35](#) Guangdong, 5 Jan. 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 50–60.

[36](#) Speech by Tan Zhenlin, Oct. 1958, Hunan, 141-2-62, p. 148.

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[3](#) Yunnan, 20 Nov. 1958, 2-1-3078, pp. 116–23; 22 Aug. 1958, 2-1-3078, pp. 1–16.

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[5](#) Yunnan, 12 Sept. 1958, 2-1-3077, pp. 55–77; 12 Sept. 1958, 2-1-3076, pp. 97–105; Sept. 1958, 2-1-3075, pp. 104–22.

[6](#) Yunnan, 28 Feb. 1959, 2-1-3700, pp. 93–8.

[7](#) Yunnan, 16 May 1959, 81-4-25, p. 17; for the average death rate in 1957 see Zhongguo tongji nianjian, 1984, Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1984, p. 83.

[8](#) Mao, Jianguo yilai, vol. 7, pp. 584–5; the original is in Yunnan, 25 Nov. 1958, 120-1-84, p. 68; see also documents from the Zhengzhou conference, 25 Nov. 1958, Hunan, 141-2-76, pp. 99–103.

[9](#) Hebei, 16 April 1961, 884-1-202, pp. 35–47.

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[12](#) Hebei, 18 Oct. 1958, 855-4-1270, pp. 1–7.

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[15](#) Hunan, 5 Nov. 1958, 141-1-1051, p. 123.

[16](#) Li Jingquan at provincial party committee, Sichuan, 17 March 1959, JC1-1533, pp. 154–5.

[17](#) Gansu, 25 Jan. 1959, 91-18-114, p. 113.

[18](#) For instance an extra 600,000 tonnes was shipped to Beijing and 800,000 to Shanghai; see Shanghai, 12 March 1959, B98-1-439, pp. 9–13.

[19](#) Yunnan, 18 Dec. 1958, 2-1-3101, pp. 301, 305–12.

## Chapter 10: Shopping Spree

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[2](#) K. A. Krutikov, Na Kitaikom napravlenii: Iz vospominanii diplomata, Moscow: Institut Daľnego Vostoka, 2003, p. 253; see also T. G. Zazerskaya, Sovetskie spetsialisty i formirovanie voenno-promyshlennogo kompleksa Kitaya (1949–1960 gg.), St Petersburg: Sankt Peterburg Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 2000.

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[6](#) BArch, Berlin, 2 Dec. 1958, DL2-4037, pp. 31–9.

[7](#) Jahrbuch 1962, Berlin, 1962, p. 548, and MfAA, Berlin, 25 Nov. 1963, C572-77-2, p. 191.

[8](#) BArch, Berlin, 7 Jan. 1961, DL2-4039, p. 7; 1959, DL2-VAN-172.

[9](#) See Zhou Enlai nianpu, vol. 2, pp. 149, 165, 231, 256, quoted in Zhang Shu Guang, Economic Cold War: America's Embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1963, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 212–13.

[10](#) See p. 105.

[11](#) A. Boone, 'The Foreign Trade of China', China Quarterly, no. 11 (Sept. 1962), p. 176.

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- [16](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.
- [17](#) BArch, Berlin, 24 June 1959, DL2-1937, p. 231.
- [18](#) 'Russia's trade war', *Time*, 5 May 1958; see also see Boone, 'Foreign Trade of China'.
- [19](#) 'Squeeze from Peking', *Time*, 21 July 1958.
- [20](#) 'Made well in Japan', *Time*, 1 Sept. 1958.
- [21](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 8 Nov. 1958, 109-1907-4, p. 49.
- [22](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, Jan. 1959, 109-1907-3, pp. 24–5.
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- [30](#) Ministry of Foreign Trade, Shanghai, 31 Oct. 1958, B29-2-97, p. 23.
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- [32](#) Hunan, 7 Feb. 1959, 163-1-1052, p. 11.
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- [38](#) Hunan, 20 Nov. 1959, 163-1-1052, pp. 25–9.
- [39](#) Hunan, 6 June 1959, 163-1-1052, pp. 119–24.
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- [2](#) Zhao Ziyang's report on Leinan county, Kaiping, 27 Jan. 1959, 3-A9-78, pp. 17–20.
- [3](#) *Neibu cankao*, 5 Feb. 1959, pp. 3–14.
- [4](#) Mao, *Jianguo yilai*, vol. 8, pp. 52–4.
- [5](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 80–1.
- [6](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 52–4.
- [7](#) Mao's speech at Zhengzhou on 18 March 1959, Gansu, 91-18-494, pp. 19–20 and 22.
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- [9](#) Mao's speech on 2 Feb. 1959, Gansu, 91-18-494, pp. 10–11.
- [10](#) Mao's instructions to Wang Renzhong, Hunan, 13 April 1959, 141-1-1310, p. 75.
- [11](#) Bo, *Ruogan zhongda shijian*, p. 830.
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[15](#) Mao's speech on 11 Aug. 1959, Gansu, 91-18-494, p. 78.

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[29](#) Li, *Lushan huiyi*, pp. 359–60.

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[7](#) Yunnan, 28 Oct. 1959, 2-1-3639, pp. 23–31.

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[9](#) Hebei, 9 Nov. 1959, 855-5-1788, pp. 3–6.

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[11](#) Hunan, 2–4 Sept. 1959, 141–1–1116, pp. 40–3, 49–50 and 121.

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- [13](#) Report from the Bank for Foreign Trade, RGANI, Moscow, 2 June 1961, 5-20-210, p. 34; for the deal see Sbornik osnovnykh deistvuiushchikh dogovorokh i sogloshenii mezhdru SSSR i KNR, 1949–1961, Moscow: Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del, no date, p. 198.
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- [2](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 20 Aug. 1960, 118-1378-13, pp. 32–3.
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- [7](#) BArch, Berlin, 12 Nov. 1960, DL2-1870, p. 34.
- [8](#) 'Famine and bankruptcy', Time, 2 June 1961.
- [9](#) Jin, Zhou Enlai zhuan, pp. 1414–15.
- [10](#) Colin Garratt, 'How to Pay for the Grain', Far Eastern Economic Review, vol. 33, no. 13 (28 Sept. 1961), p. 644.
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- [15](#) Boone, 'Foreign Trade of China'.
- [16](#) Report by Zhou Enlai, Hunan, 4 Dec. 1961, 141-1-1931, pp. 52–3.
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- [20](#) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 4 April 1961, 109-2264-1, pp. 1–8.
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[8](#) Speech on 25 March 1959, Gansu, 19-18-494, pp. 44–6.

[9](#) Zhejiang, 16 July 1961, J132-13-7, pp. 22–8; compare with Yang, *Mubei*, p. 540.

[10](#) Report from the State Council, Gansu, 15 June 1960, *zhongfa* (60) 547, 91-18-160, pp. 208–12.

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- [24](#) Nanjing, 20 May 1959, 4003-2-315, p. 12.
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- [4](#) Beijing, May 1961, 1-14-666, p. 25.
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- [6](#) Sichuan, 29 Nov. and 24 Dec. 1958, JC1-1294, pp. 71 and 129.
- [7](#) Sichuan, 1959, JC44-2786, p. 55.
- [8](#) Hunan, 1961, 167-1-1016, pp. 1 and 144.
- [9](#) Hunan, 1960, 146-1-520, p. 102.
- [10](#) Interview with Jiang Guihua, born 1940, Zhaojue county, Sichuan, April 2007.
- [11](#) Hubei, 3 July 1961, SZ18-2-202, p. 70.

## Chapter 31: Accidents

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- [2](#) Hunan, 9 March 1959, 163-1-1046, p. 24.
- [3](#) Nanjing, 16 April 1959, 4003-1-279, pp. 151–2.
- [4](#) Nanjing, 31 Oct. 1959, 5003-3-711, p. 33.
- [5](#) Hubei, 5 Jan. 1960, SZ34-4-477, p. 34.
- [6](#) Hunan, 16 Jan. and 12 Feb. 1960, 141-1-1655, pp. 54–5 and 66–7.
- [7](#) Report from the State Council, Hubei, 3 March 1960, SZ34-4-477, p. 29.
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- [9](#) Chishui, 27 Feb. 1959, 1-A10-25, p. 2.
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- [4](#) Sichuan, 18 Jan. 1961, JC1-2418, p. 2; also JC1-2419, p. 43.
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- [11](#) Nanjing, 6 April 1959, 4003-1-171, p. 138.
- [12](#) Nanjing, 25 Oct. 1959, 5003-3-727, pp. 19–21.
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- [15](#) Wuxi, 1961, B1-2-164, pp. 58–66.
- [16](#) Hubei, 25 Feb. and 7 July 1961, SZ1-2-898, pp. 7–11 and 45–9.
- [17](#) Hunan, 25 Nov. 1960, 265-1-260, p. 85; 8 Dec. 1960, 212-1-508, p. 163.
- [18](#) Nanjing, 27 Aug. 1959, 5003-3-727, p. 88.
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- [21](#) Wuhan, 19 Feb. 1962, 71-1-1400, pp. 18–21.
- [22](#) Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 60–4.
- [23](#) Guangdong, 1959, 217-1-69, pp. 95–100.
- [24](#) Zhejiang, 10 May 1960, J165-10-66, pp. 1–5.
- [25](#) Sichuan, 9 July 1960, JC133-219, p. 106.
- [26](#) Wuhan, 16 Aug. 1961, 71-1-1400, pp. 9–10.
- [27](#) Interview with Li Dajun, born 1947, Xixian county, Henan, Oct. 2006.
- [28](#) Nanjing, 1961, 5065-3-381, pp. 53–4.
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- [30](#) Wuhan, 30 June 1959, 30-1-124, pp. 31–3.
- [31](#) Wuhan, 1 July 1960, 28-1-650, p. 31.
- [32](#) Wuhan, 30 June 1959, 30-1-124, pp. 31–3.
- [33](#) Sichuan, 16 May 1960, JC1-2115, pp. 57–8.
- [34](#) Sichuan, 1960, JC1-2114, p. 8.
- [35](#) Sichuan, 1959, JC9-448, pp. 46–7.
- [36](#) Sichuan, 1959, all of JC44-2786.
- [37](#) Report from the Ministry of Health, Hubei, 24 April 1960, SZ115-2-355, pp. 10–13.
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- [41](#) Jean Pasqualini, *Prisoner of Mao*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp. 216–19.
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- [44](#) Interview with Yan Shifu, born 1948, Zhiyang, Sichuan, April 2007.
- [45](#) Interview with Zhu Erge, born 1950, Jianyang, Sichuan, April 2007.
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- [53](#) Sichuan, 1960, JC133-219, p. 154.
- [54](#) Sichuan, Oct. 1961, JC1-2418, p. 168; 1962, JC44-1441, p. 27.
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[2](#) Forty per cent were sentenced to a term of one to five years, 25 per cent were put under supervision; Nanjing, 8 June 1959, 5003-3-722, p. 83.

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[9](#) Report from the provincial Public Security Bureau, Gansu, 26 June 1960, 91-9-63, pp. 1–4.

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[11](#) Hebei, 1962, 884-1-223, p. 150.

[12](#) Papers from the tenth national conference on national security, Gansu, 8 April 1960, *zhongfa* (60) 318, 91-18-179, p. 26.

[13](#) *Ibid.*

[14](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

[15](#) Speech on 21 Aug. 1958, Hunan, 141-1-1036, p. 29.

[16](#) Hebei, 27 June 1959, 884-1-183, p. 128.

[17](#) Papers from the tenth national conference on national security, Gansu, 8 April 1960, *zhongfa* (60) 318, 91-18-179, p. 26.

[18](#) Hebei, 16 April 1961, 884-1-202, pp. 35–47.

[19](#) Yunnan, 22 May 1959, 2-1-3700, pp. 93–8.

[20](#) Guangdong, 2 Jan. 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 61–6.

[21](#) Kaiping, 22 Sept. 1960, 3-A10-31, p. 10.

[22](#) *Neibu cankao*, 30 Nov. 1960, p. 16.

[23](#) Guangdong, 15 Aug. 1961, 219-2-318, p. 120.

[24](#) Beijing, 11 Jan. 1961, 1-14-790, p. 17.

[25](#) This is also the estimate of Jean-Luc Domenach, who has written what remains the most detailed and reliable history of the camp system in China; Jean-Luc Domenach, *L'Archipel oublié*, Paris: Fayard, 1992, p. 242.

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[2](#) Interview with Li Popo, born 1938, Langzhong county, Sichuan, April 2007.

[3](#) *Neibu cankao*, 27 June 1960, pp. 11–12.

[4](#) Guangdong, 25 Jan. 1961, 217-1-645, p. 13.

[5](#) Guangdong, 30 Dec. 1960, 217-1-576, p. 78.

[6](#) Guangdong, 5 Feb. 1961, 217-1-645, pp. 35–49.

[7](#) Hunan, 3 April 1961, 151-1-24, p. 6.

[8](#) Hunan, 1960, 146-1-520, pp. 97–106.

[9](#) Hunan, 8 April 1961, 146-1-583, p. 96.

[10](#) Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 25–8.

[11](#) Hebei, 4 Jan. 1961, 880-1-11, p. 30.

[12](#) Hunan, 1960, 146-1-520, pp. 97–106.

[13](#) Guangdong, 16 April 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 123–31; 25 Jan. 1961, 217-1-646, pp. 15–17.

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- [18](#) Guangdong, 23 March 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 10–13.
- [19](#) Hunan, 15 Nov. 1960, 141-1-1672, pp. 32–3.
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- [22](#) Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 60–4.
- [23](#) Hebei, 27 June 1961, 880-1-7, p. 55.
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- [27](#) Guangdong, 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 32–8.
- [28](#) Guangdong, 29 Jan. 1961, 217-1-618, pp. 42–6; also Hebei, 27 June 1961, 880-1-7, p. 55.
- [29](#) Hunan, 3 and 14 April 1961, 151-1-24, pp. 1–13 and 59–68; also 3 Feb. 1961, 146-1-582, p. 22.
- [30](#) Neibu cankao, 21 Oct. 1960, p. 12.
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- [32](#) Neibu cankao, 30 Nov. 1960, p. 17.
- [33](#) Hunan, 3 Feb. 1961, 146-1-582, p. 22.
- [34](#) Hunan, 10 Aug. 1961, 146-1-579, pp. 32–3.
- [35](#) Sichuan, 1960, JC1-2112, p. 4.
- [36](#) Guangdong, 16 April 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 123–31; 25 Jan. 1961, 217-1-646, pp. 15–17.
- [37](#) Guangdong, 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 32–8; 1961, 217-1-618, pp. 18–41, in particular pp. 21 and 35.
- [38](#) Hunan, 1961, 151-1-20, pp. 34–5.
- [39](#) Interview with Mr Leung, born 1949, Zhongshan county, Guangdong, 13 July 2006.
- [40](#) Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 60–4.
- [41](#) Hunan, 8 April 1961, 146-1-583, p. 96; also 12 May 1960, 146-1-520, pp. 69–75.
- [42](#) Hunan, Sept. 1959, 141-1-1117, pp. 1–4.
- [43](#) Macheng, 20 Jan. 1959, 1-1-378, p. 24; Guangdong, 1960, 217-1-645, pp. 60–4; Neibu cankao, 30 Nov. 1960, p. 17.
- [44](#) Beijing, 7 Jan. 1961, 1-14-790, p. 10.
- [45](#) Hunan, 1961, 151-1-20, pp. 34–5.
- [46](#) Guangdong, 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 32–8.
- [47](#) Report by Xu Qiwen, Hunan, 12 March 1961, 141-1-1899, pp. 216–22.
- [48](#) Yunnan, 9 Dec. 1960, 2-1-4157, p. 171.
- [49](#) Report by provincial party committee work team, Sichuan, 1961, JC1-2616, pp. 110–11.
- [50](#) Hunan, 15 Nov. 1960, 141-2-125, p. 1.
- [51](#) Hunan, 8 April 1961, 146-1-583, p. 95.
- [52](#) Report by Xu Qiwen, Hunan, 12 March 1961, 141-1-1899, p. 222.
- [53](#) Xinyang diwei zuzhi chuli bangongshi, 'Guanyu diwei changwu shuji Wang Dafu tongzhifan suo fan cuowu ji shishi cailiao', 5 Jan. 1962, pp. 1–2.
- [54](#) Sichuan, 5 Jan. 1961, JC1-2604, p. 35.
- [55](#) Speeches on 21 and 24 Aug. 1958, Hunan, 141-1-1036, pp. 24–5 and 31.
- [56](#) Speech by Li Jingquan on 5 April 1962, Sichuan, JC1-2809, p. 11.
- [57](#) Hunan, 4 Feb. 1961, 151-1-20, p. 14.
- [58](#) Hunan, 1961, 151-1-20, pp. 34–5.
- [59](#) Report from central inspection committee, Hunan, 15 Nov. 1960, 141-2-125, p. 3.
- [60](#) Sichuan, 29 Nov. 1960, JC1-2109, p. 118.
- [61](#) Hunan, 4 Feb. 1961, 151-1-20, p. 14.
- [62](#) Ibid., pp. 12–13.
- [63](#) Yunnan, 9 Dec. 1960, 2-1-4157, p. 170.
- [64](#) Guangdong, 1961, 217-1-644, pp. 32–8.
- [65](#) Sichuan, 2 May 1960, JC1-2109, pp. 10 and 51.
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- [73](#) Guangdong, 5 Feb. 1961, 217-1-119, p. 44.
- [74](#) Guangdong, 2 Jan. 1961, 217-1-643, pp. 61–6.
- [75](#) Kaiping, 6 June 1959, 3-A9-80, p. 6.
- [76](#) Nanjing, 15 Sept. 1959, 5003-3-721, p. 70.
- [77](#) Nanjing, 8 May 1959, 5003-3-721, p. 12.

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- [2](#) Material quoted in Yang, Mubei, pp. 901–3.
- [3](#) Gansu, 5 July 1965, 91-5-501, pp. 4–5.
- [4](#) Ibid., p. 24.
- [5](#) Ibid., pp. 5–7.
- [6](#) Ibid., p. 7.
- [7](#) Gansu, 12 Jan. 1961, 91-4-735, p. 79.
- [8](#) Gansu, 10 Feb. 1960, 91-4-648, entire file; 24 March 1960, 91-4-647, entire file.
- [9](#) Gansu, 21 April 1960, 91-18-164, pp. 153–60.
- [10](#) Sichuan, 1961, JC1-2608, pp. 1–3 and 21–2; 1961, JC1-2605, pp. 147–55.
- [11](#) Sichuan, 1961, JC1-2605, p. 171.
- [12](#) Sichuan, 1961, JC1-2606, pp. 2–3.
- [13](#) Reports by Yang Wanxuan, Sichuan, 22 and 27 Jan. 1961, JC1-2606, pp. 48–9 and 63–4; also 25 and 27 Jan. 1961, JC1-2608, pp. 83–8 and 89–90.
- [14](#) Sichuan, 8 Dec. 1958, JC1-1804, pp. 35–7.
- [15](#) Sichuan, 4 April 1961, JC12-1247, pp. 7–14.
- [16](#) Report from the supervisory committee, Chishui, 1961, 2-A6-2, pp. 25–6.
- [17](#) Chishui, 30 Sept. 1958, 1-A9-4, pp. 30–1; 14 Jan. 1961, 1-A12-1, pp. 83–7; Dec. 1960, 1-A11-30, pp. 67–71; also 25 April 1960, 1-A11-39, pp. 11–15.
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- [19](#) Guizhou, 1960, 90-1-2234, p. 24.
- [20](#) Guizhou, 1962, 90-1-2708, printed pages 1–6.
- [21](#) Chishui, 9 May 1960, 1-A11-9, pp. 5–9.
- [22](#) Letter from Nie Rongzhen to Mao Zedong sent from Chengdu, Gansu, 16 March 1960, 91-9-134, p. 2.
- [23](#) Shandong, 1962, A1-2-1130, pp. 39–44.
- [24](#) Shandong, 1962, A1-2-1127, pp. 7–11.
- [25](#) Report by Tan Qilong to Shu Tong and Mao Zedong, Shandong, 11 April 1959, A1-1-465, p. 25.
- [26](#) Confession by Shu Tong, Shandong, 10 Dec. 1960, A1-1-634, p. 23.
- [27](#) Ibid., p. 9.
- [28](#) Letter by Yang Xuanwu on Shu Tong to the provincial party committee, Shandong, 9 April 1961, A1-2-980, p. 15; see also 1961, A1-2-1025, pp. 9–10.
- [29](#) This is the estimate of a group of official party historians from Fuyang: Fuyang shiwei dangshi yanjiushi (eds), Zhengtu: Fuyang shehuizhuyi shiqi dangshi zhuanli huibian (Compendium of special topics on the party history of Fuyang during the socialist era), Fuyang: Anhui jingshi wenhua chuanbo youxian zeren gongsi, 2007, p. 155.
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- [31](#) Fuyang, 12 March 1961, J3-1-228, p. 20; 18 Aug. 1961, J3-2-280, p. 126.
- [32](#) Fuyang, 10 Jan. 1961, J3-2-278, p. 85.
- [33](#) Ibid., p. 86.
- [34](#) Fuyang, 12 Aug. 1961, J3-1-228, p. 96b.
- [35](#) Fuyang, 17 Aug. 1961, J3-2-280, p. 115.
- [36](#) Fuyang, 10 Jan. 1961, J3-2-278, p. 86.
- [37](#) Fuyang, 30 Jan. 1961, J3-2-278, pp. 2–9.
- [38](#) Confession by Hao Ruyi, leader of Jieshou, Fuyang, 10 Jan. 1961, J3-2-280, p. 48.
- [39](#) Ibid.
- [40](#) Confession by Zhao Song, leader of Linquan, 15 Feb. 1961, Fuyang, J3-2-280, p. 91.
- [41](#) Fuyang, 6 Jan. 1961, J3-1-227, pp. 54–5.

- [42](#) Fuyang, 12 June 1961, J3-2-279, p. 15.
- [43](#) Fuyang, 20 March 1961, J3-2-278, pp. 67 and 69.
- [44](#) Ibid.
- [45](#) Fuyang, 29 Feb. 1961, J3-2-278, p. 64.
- [46](#) Report from party secretary Liu Daoqian to the regional party committee, Fuyang, 6 Jan. 1961, J3-1-227, pp. 54–5.

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- [4](#) Ibid.
- [5](#) Report by work group sent by the provincial party committee, Shandong, 1961, A1-2-1025, p. 7.
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- [7](#) Confession by Shu Tong, Shandong, 10 Dec. 1960, A1-1-634, p. 10.
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- [9](#) Neibu cankao, 14 April 1960, pp. 25–6.
- [10](#) Gansu, Jan.–Feb. 1961, 91-18-200, p. 271.
- [11](#) Gansu, 3 March 1961, 91-4-898, pp. 82–7.
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## Chapter 37: The Final Tally

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- [5](#) Cao, Da jihuanguang, p. 281.
- [6](#) Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, pp. 271–2.
- [7](#) Hubei, 1962, SZ34-5-143, entire file.
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- [13](#) Sichuan, 2 Nov. 1959, JC1-1808, p. 166.
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- [20](#) Hebei, 21 Jan. 1961, 855-19-855, pp. 100–4; on Hu Kaiming, see Yu, *Dayuejin ku rizi*, pp. 451–75.
- [21](#) Cao, Da jihuanguang, p. 234.
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- [24](#) Gansu, Jan.–Feb. 1961, 91-18-200, p. 57; Cao, Da jihuanguang, pp. 271 and 465.
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- [30](#) Chishui, 9 May 1960, 1-A11-9, pp. 5–9; Cao, Da jihuāng, p. 164.
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- [32](#) Shandong, 1962, A1-2-1127, p. 46; Cao, Da jihuāng, p. 219.
- [33](#) Shandong, 1962, A1-2-1130, p. 42.
- [34](#) Shandong, 7 June 1961, A1-2-1209, p. 110; Cao, Da jihuāng, p. 231.
- [35](#) Guangdong, 1961, 217-1-644, p. 72; Cao, Da jihuāng, p. 129.
- [36](#) Guangdong, 20 Jan. 1961, 217-1-644, p. 61; Cao, Da jihuāng, pp. 126–8.
- [37](#) Hunan, June and 28 Aug. 1964, 141-1-2494, pp. 74 and 81–2.
- [38](#) Ministry of Public Security report on population statistics, 16 Nov. 1963, Chishui, 1-A14-15, pp. 2–3.
- [39](#) Report by Central Census Office, 26 May 1964, Chishui, 1-A15-15, pp. 6–7.
- [40](#) Becker, Hungry Ghosts, p. 272.
- [41](#) Yu, Dayuejin ku rizi, p. 8.

## Epilogue

- [1](#) Liu's speech on 27 Jan. 1962, Gansu, 91-18-493, pp. 58–60 and 62.
- [2](#) Li, Private Life of Chairman Mao, p. 386.
- [3](#) Lin Biao speech, Gansu, 29 Jan. 1962, 91-18-493, pp. 163–4.
- [4](#) Zhou Enlai speech, Gansu, 7 Feb. 1962, 91-18-493, p. 87.
- [5](#) Liu Yuan, 'Mao Zedong wei shenma yao dadao Liu Shaoqi', quoted in Gao, Zhou Enlai, pp. 97–8. For a slightly different version from Liu's wife, see Huang, Wang Guangmei fangtan lu, p. 288.

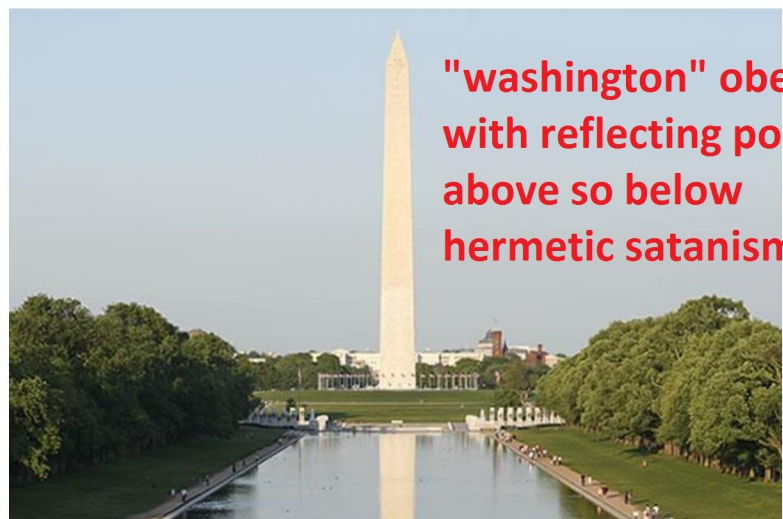
A FEW JUDAEO-MASONIC OBELISKS SEXUAL MEMBER SYMBOL SEX "FORCE" WORSHIP



BIG BEN OBELISK  
WITH PYRAMID OBELISK SHARD LIKE SAN  
FRANCISCO HAS AS WELL



ARGENTINA



"washington" obelisk  
with reflecting pool as  
above so below  
hermetic satanism

## MASONIC OBELISKS

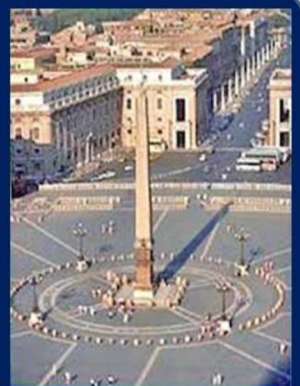
Saturn(Satan) V Obelisk for  
launch( masonic sex ritual).  
Earth is flat no rockets go to space  
there is no space like they tell us.



The City,  
London



Washington  
Monument



Vatican

Vatican infiltration by kabbalists artists  
architects in occultist "renaissance"  
rosicrucian/english/german origins like it's  
sister protestant movment. "Do as thou wilt"

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The author and publisher would like to thank David King for permission to reproduce Plates 1 and 16.





# Foreword

One of the most remarkable things about the famine which occurred in China between 1958 and 1962 was that for over twenty years, no one was sure whether it had even taken place. Whatever else the Communists in China might have done, it was widely assumed that they had at least fed their vast population and had ended China's seemingly perennial famines. Then, in the mid-1980s, American demographers were able to examine the population statistics which had been released when China launched her open-door policy in 1979. Their conclusion was startling: at least 30 million people had starved to death, far more than anyone, including the most militant critics of the Chinese Communist Party, had ever imagined.

Why, and how, did such a cataclysm take place? Who was to blame? How was it kept secret for so long? And what was life like in the countryside? How did people behave and how did they survive?

This book is an attempt to seek answers to these questions. Inside China, the famine is rarely mentioned or discussed, and much of the story remains shrouded in secrecy. In the official view, there were merely three years of natural disasters: the real disaster took place later, during the Cultural Revolution, when senior Communist leaders were persecuted. Yet in the last few years, a growing number of Chinese living abroad have written memoirs that shed more light on the subject. It has become clear that the greatest trauma suffered by the Chinese people was indeed the famine, not the Cultural Revolution. However, most of these memoirs are by intellectuals who, during the famine, were either in the cities or in prison camps and so knew little about the fate of the vast majority of the Chinese population – the peasants. It was the peasants who were the chief victims of the famine but peasants do not write books, or make films, and rarely have a chance to talk to outsiders. Even those who obtain official permission to carry out research in China's countryside are rarely, if ever, allowed to speak freely to peasants. Invariably, local officials have coached the peasant beforehand on what to say and insist on being present at the interview. Often, too, they interrupt to talk on behalf of the peasants who, in any case, may well speak a dialect unintelligible to outsiders.

For those who were in the countryside at the time, the horror of the famine is indelibly imprinted on their memories. As the dissident Wei Jingsheng has written, peasants talk of those days as if they had lived through an apocalypse. Even after three decades, memories are still fresh, as became clear when I started to find people who had then been in the countryside but who were now living outside China. Advertisements placed in the overseas Chinese press in 1994 brought hundreds of responses, ranging from a few scribbled lines to accounts twenty or thirty pages long. I visited some of those who replied, at first in Britain and later in the United States, Hong Kong and eventually Dharamsala in India where I met Tibetans who had fled to the Dalai Lama's place of exile. Then, armed with a clearer picture of what had happened, I travelled around rural areas of Henan, Anhui and Sichuan and talked to older peasants who had survived the famine.

The background to the famine is drawn from the growing body of academic work on Chinese agriculture. I was also fortunate in being able to find written sources to substantiate the cruelties that eyewitnesses had described. The relative freedom allowed to obscure publishing houses in the provinces in recent years has meant that a surprising amount of material about the famine has become available. In addition, Chinese intellectuals who went into exile after 1989 were able to provide a number of official documents about events in Henan and Anhui which offered detailed facts and figures.

Even so, many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are still missing. Knowledge of events at the highest levels of the Communist Party at key moments is often sketchy, making it difficult to understand clearly why things happened as they did. Much data about death totals is also absent and it is hard to be sure of the reliability of what has come to light. Even today Chinese statistics are rarely coherent, and the central government frequently complains about the regularity with which the lower levels of the administration falsify figures. As Walter Mallory wrote in 1926 of a request for the 'bottom facts' about an earlier famine in China, 'There is no bottom in China, and no facts.' A fuller account of the famine may have to wait until the Party's own archives are open to researchers but this is unlikely to occur so long as those who share responsibility for the famine remain in power. Lord Acton once spoke of the 'undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on the wrong': it is no surprise that the Communist Party believes its control over the past is the key to its future.

# Hebrew Alphabet Letters Number Values

א  
ב  
ג  
ד  
ה  
ו  
ז  
ח  
ט  
י  
כ

Aleph -	1
Beth -	2
Gimel -	3
Daleth -	4
Heh -	5
Vav -	6
Zain -	7
Cheth -	8
Teth -	9
Yod -	10
Kaph -	20



ל  
מ  
נ  
ס  
ע  
פ  
צ  
ק  
ר  
ש  
ת

Lamed -	30
Mem -	40
Nun -	50
Samekh -	60
Ayin -	70
Peh -	80
Tzaddi -	90
Qoph -	100
Resh -	200
Shin -	300
Tau -	400

**MONSTER ENERGY DRINK**

=  
**666**



# Map



# The Year Zero

The year 1960 was the darkest moment in the long, long history of China. Two thousand years before, a massive peasant uprising brought about the collapse of the Qin empire, the first great dictatorship to unify and control all the disparate peoples of ancient China. Now the nation had been unified once again under one great leader, Mao Zedong; and the fertile fields of Henan, where the first known Chinese dynasty, the Shang, was founded, were littered with the bodies of peasants who had starved to death.

In a small village in Guangshan county in Henan, Mrs Liu Xiaohua, now aged 65, still vividly remembers the events of thirty-six years ago. One afternoon in 1994, perched on a small footstool, dressed in faded blue cotton trousers and smock, and occasionally smoking a cigarette, she recalled what had happened. On the muddy path leading from her village, dozens of corpses lay unburied. In the barren fields there were others; and amongst the dead, the survivors crawled slowly on their hands and knees searching for wild grass seeds to eat. In the ponds and ditches people squatted in the mud hunting for frogs and trying to gather weeds.

It was winter, and bitterly cold, but she said that everyone was dressed only in thin and filthy rags tied together with bits of grass and stuffed with straw. Some of the survivors looked healthy, their faces puffed up and their limbs swollen by oedema, but the rest were as thin as skeletons. Sometimes she saw her neighbours and relatives simply fall down as they shuffled through the village and die without a sound. Others were dead on their earthen *kang* beds when she awoke in the morning. The dead were left where they died because she said that no one had the strength to bury them.

She remembered, too, the unnatural silence. The village oxen had died, the dogs had been eaten and the chickens and ducks had long ago been confiscated by the Communist Party in lieu of grain taxes. There were no birds left in the trees, and the trees themselves had been stripped of their leaves and bark. At night there was no longer even the scratching of rats and mice, for they too had been eaten or had starved to death. Lucky villagers would sometimes find their corpses curled up in a hole but it was better still to find an old burrow from another season which might contain a winter store of grain or berries. Most of all she missed the cries of young babies, for no one had been able to give birth for some time. The youngest children had all perished, the girls first. Mrs Liu had lost a daughter. The milk in her breasts had dried up and she had been forced to watch her child die. Her aunt, her mother and two brothers had also died.

The village is now a collection of mud huts surrounded by bamboo and trees, and the most prosperous villagers are building fine brick houses with tiled roofs and walled courtyards. Thirty-six years ago, all the villagers lived in houses made of mud bricks with thatched straw roofs, each divided into two or three rooms. In February 1960, Mrs Liu remembered, most of the huts were deserted. The straw roofs had fallen in and weeds grew in the courtyards. The wood from the doors and windows had been taken away and often the lintels too, all to be burnt in furnaces to make steel. At night the family slept together on the *kang* which could be heated from underneath. That winter, however, without even a cotton eiderdown to keep them warm, they froze. The best eiderdowns had been given to the commune and in many households the last shreds of cotton had been eaten. There was no fire in the clay hearth under the *kang* because the cadres, the officials of the Communist Party, had forbidden the peasants to cook food at home and all fires had been outlawed. Their iron griddles and nearly all the woks and pans had been taken away to be melted down into steel. Sometimes the peasants used an earthenware pot to try and boil some soup or bake a kind of pancake of leaves but they were usually caught and a savage beating would follow. There was only one place in the village from which smoke was allowed to rise. This was the collective kitchen, set up when the commune was founded two years earlier. It was established in the house of the Wang family. They had once been the richest peasants in the village but they had been dispossessed of their land and killed before the commune was created. On the wall outside, the cadres had painted a slogan: 'Long live the people's communes.'

The collective kitchen was, said Mrs Liu, the most terrible aspect of the commune. The grain from the autumn harvest had been taken from the villagers and delivered up to the state. Now the only source of food was the kitchen. Twice a day, at 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., the cook would bang a piece of metal hanging from a rope and the villagers would queue up with their bowls to receive their ration of soup. The soup was a thin gruel into which the cooks had thrown the leaves of sweet potatoes and turnips, ground corn stalks, wild grasses and anything else the peasants could gather. In queuing for the soup the villagers fought with each other, the younger and stronger ones pushing the elderly aside. The first to be served risked getting nothing but water, and those who came late might find it had all gone. She remembered one incident when a cadre tried to restore discipline and punched a woman so hard that she fell down and never got up. Those who worked in the kitchen survived the longest but the best off were the family of the village Party secretary. At night he was able to steal food to feed his family, and although this was only dried pea powder, it kept Mrs Liu, his sister-in-law, alive.

The first to die, she said, were the families of those who had been labelled rich peasants, for they were given the lowest rations. The next group were those who became too weak to work, for they were given nothing. Families tried to pool their rations and often the husband would rule that any female children should be allowed to die first since if they lived they would later be given in marriage to another family. Their food was given to the elderly. Then these too began to die. Often the villagers hid the corpses in their huts so that they could claim an extra ration. A few villagers had tried to hide some food by burying it underground. She remembered in particular the constant searches for hidden grain. Teams of cadres looking for secret cavities would go round the huts with iron rods, poking at the roofs and walls and prodding the ground. They searched through the courtyards and the piles of dung and straw, determined to find the grain that they said the peasants were hiding. By that time the peasants had nothing, but a few months earlier they had collected some grain which they had gathered from the fields at night before the harvest was taken in. During the harvest season, the cadres had searched the peasants as they left the fields and had beaten anyone they caught trying to eat the wheat kernels. Mrs Liu had been forced to spit out some kernels when she was spotted chewing while labouring in a field. She was not severely punished but others were. One man was tied with his hands behind his back and suspended from a tree. Another, the widow of a rich peasant, was buried alive with her children. Still others were dragged by their hair through the village while the rest were ordered to beat and kick them.

She knew, too, that at night some of her neighbours went into the fields to cut the flesh from the corpses and eat it. She pointed to a neighbouring village, another collection of huts across the fields, where a woman had killed her own baby. She and her husband had eaten it. Afterwards she went mad and the secret came out. That winter, said Mrs Liu, human beings turned into wolves. There were stories that some of the villagers who fled were killed and eaten. Too weak to walk far, they often collapsed and died where they had fallen on the road. Some of those who fled were caught by the militia, villagers wearing red armbands and armed with sticks and knives, who were ordered to patrol the main roads. She thought they were put in prison and died there. In other places, she heard that the villagers, led by the Party secretary, had tried to storm the granary at the commune headquarters but had been shot by members of the militia armed with guns.

When the villagers were too feeble to go out into the fields, the cadres came and beat them, trying to force them to go out and forage for food. And throughout that winter they were made to gather for frequent political meetings and to receive instructions on work quotas. There were health inspections, too, and she remembered how difficult it was trying to keep her hut clean. Many villagers suffered bouts of diarrhoea and vomiting from the strange diet. Others became constipated and had to use their fingers to pull out the hardened waste from their rectums. A few tried to eat earth mixed

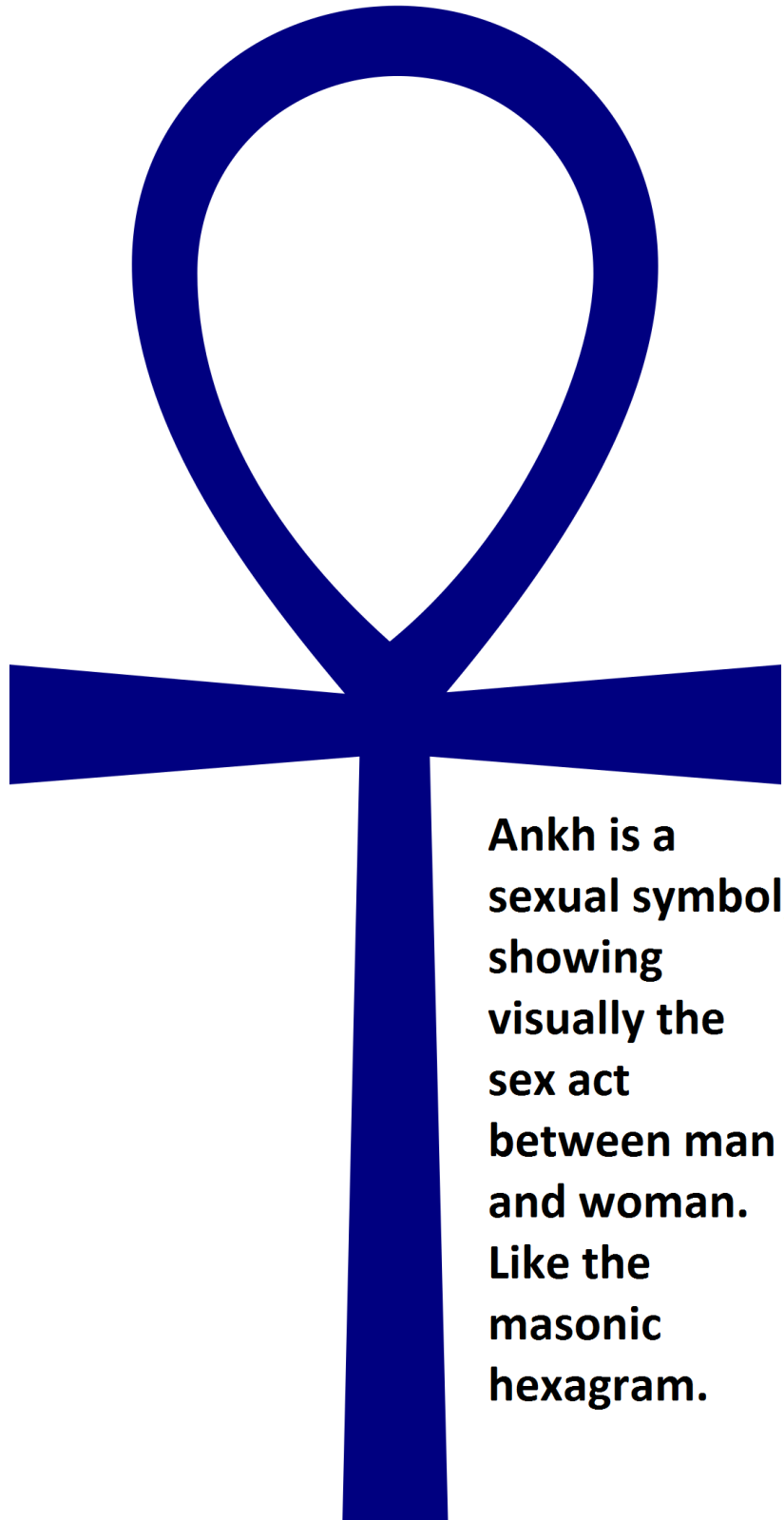
with grass but it solidified in their stomachs and they died.

Above all, Mrs Liu recalled the end when the soldiers came in trucks and began throwing sacks of wheat on to the road. She managed to walk the six miles to the road and ate the grain raw. Out of the 300 people that had been in her village at the start of the famine, only 80 survived. Mrs Liu still believes it was Chairman Mao who saved them by sending troops to rescue them and that otherwise all would have perished.

This book is the story of what happened not just in this one village in Guangshan county but in a million others throughout China.



## Part One China: Land of Famine



**Ankh is a sexual symbol, showing visually the sex act between man and woman. Like the masonic hexagram.**



## China: Land of Famine

‘What is important after all? Everyone must eat – that is important.’ Chen Duxiu, founder of the Chinese Communist Party

‘In the wake of mighty armies, bad harvests follow without fail.’ Lao Tzu

On a tomb in the capital of the Shang dynasty (c.1480-1050 BC), the first in Chinese history, is an inscription: ‘Why are there disasters? It is because the Emperor wants to punish mankind.’ Historical records show that China has always been the land of famine and the Chinese a people who have prostrated themselves before the wayward power of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven. The records of succeeding dynasties reveal that every year floods and droughts brought famine to some part or other of the empire. Indeed, researchers in the 1930s discovered documentary evidence that from the year 108 BC until ad 1911, China suffered no fewer than 1,828 major famines.<sup>1</sup>

It was the greatest task of the Emperor and his ministers to control the floods and to intercede with Heaven to bring rain in times of drought. In the Zhou dynasty (c. 1122-221 BC), the Emperor held ceremonies in which young girls were cast into the rivers to prevent floods, and on altars and in temples he presided over sacrifices and ritual dances to placate Heaven. Five hundred years ago, in the Ming dynasty, the Emperor would walk barefoot to pray at the Temple of Heaven and sleep on the altar in his clothes to beg for rain. During the last dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911), each year the Emperor would order local officials to build temples and pray. Even in modern times little changed. Newspapers in the late 1930s reported how, as in many primitive societies, people still slaughtered animals to bring rain. The Nationalist Governor of Hunan province would go into temples to pray, throwing tiger bones into ponds to please the dragon in the waters and forbidding the slaughter of livestock for three days. Even the Panchen Lama was summoned from Tibet by the Nationalist government to recite scriptures and to pray for rain.<sup>2</sup>

It was also the responsibility of the Emperor to levy taxes on the peasantry and to store surplus grain in state granaries. If in times of famine his officials failed in their responsibility or sold the grain for profit, the people starved or tried to flee to other parts of the empire. And when they had sold all that they possessed, they sold their children. Cannibalism was common and at times people even ate their own children. During the terrible famine of 1877 the Roman Catholic Bishop of Shanxi, Monsignor Louis Monagata, reported that ‘now they kill the living to have them for food. Husbands eat their wives. Parents eat their sons and daughters and children eat their parents.’<sup>3</sup>

The terrible famines which devastated China in the nineteenth century convinced Europeans who witnessed them that Thomas Malthus had been right: in China the population was growing faster than the food supply. Chinese scholars have attributed this growth to imperial policies. When the Manchu tribes of Manchuria established the Qing dynasty, they abolished the poll tax and instead preferred to rely on land taxes. Thus people were not penalized for having more children and land ownership became more important than ever. The population grew at the formidable annual rate of more than 2.5 per cent: by 1762 it had passed the 200 million mark, by 1790 it had reached 300 million, and by 1834 it stood at well over 400 million.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis created by the population explosion almost brought down the Qing dynasty. In 1851, a massive peasant rebellion erupted. Led by Hong Xiuquan, a peasant who believed himself to be the brother of Christ, the leaders of what became known as the Taiping sought to establish a ‘heavenly kingdom’ through social reform, the sharing of property in common and the equal distribution of land. Though the Manchus, with the help of the Western powers, eventually defeated the Taipings and restored order, they could find no way of ending the food shortages which steadily worsened. In 1876, three years of drought in northern China carried off some 13 million people. A decade later a further 2 million died when the Yellow River burst its banks, drowning many and inundating fields.

Some Westerners saw famine as a necessary evil, nature’s check on overpopulation. The American A. K. Norton wrote in *China and the Powers* that ‘The numbers of the people must be cut down and if disease, war and plague are not sufficient, famine may be depended upon to fill up the toll. Herein lies the paramount reality of the China problem.’

The Manchus tried to cope with the crisis by allowing their subjects to emigrate abroad and to migrate into Manchu and Mongolian lands. Until then they and their Inner Mongolian allies had forbidden Chinese to settle in the thinly populated steppes of their homeland. From the end of the nineteenth century millions of Chinese peasants crossed the Great Wall and settled in Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and elsewhere. This ‘colonization’ policy met with the approval of some Westerners and was facilitated by the building of railways linking these regions to central China.

The introduction of new crops from the Americas also helped an internal colonization of hitherto neglected parts of China. Maize, peanuts and sweet potatoes could grow in poor hilly regions and provide a living where before there had been none. Such gains, however, were short-lived. Intensive cultivation all too often resulted in environmental degradation and diminishing returns. A Western traveller, Graham Peck, wrote of what he saw in Shaanxi province in north-west China in 1941:

*The land was dying and its people with it. The first Westerners who travelled through Shuangshipu and wrote about it in the early nineteenth century had reported that this was wild empty country, heavily wooded with pines, holding only a few farmhouses along the torrential mountain stream. Now there were wretched little farms right up to the summit of the mountains. Except for the cherished domestic trees around the farmhouses, only a scruff of secondary domestic growth was left on the most inaccessible steps. Already the thin red and yellow soil of the hilly fields was clutched on every flank by jagged erosion gullies...*

*The few acres of good farmland in the flatter valleys were slowly being covered by dry deltas of gravel and boulder, tumbled out of the ravines by the fierce, brief rains which came in the summer when they could also harm the mountain fields, washing out the new crops.*<sup>5</sup>

The thoughtless felling of trees was, he recorded, part of the ‘slow murder of the country’, accelerating both the erosion of the soil and the speed with which rainwater ran off the land. Today the same process is still underway, filling the main rivers with silt and increasing the risk of sudden floods.

Chinese and foreigners like Peck observed, too, that overpopulation by the dead as well as the living was reducing the amount of arable land available for cultivation. Even in this region, Peck wrote, ‘on the mountains the homes of the living were outnumbered by the mounds which housed the dead and the shrines to appease local spirits. Each new grave, always placed in a good field, took more farmland from the survivors.’ Others noticed that many peasants were reluctant to leave their ancestral lands and seek a better life elsewhere because, as Walter H. Mallory, the Secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission, complained, they felt impelled to stay and care for the graves of their ancestors.

From the turn of the century Westerners in China became increasingly concerned with famine relief. When a major famine struck Gansu and Shaanxi provinces in 1920, missionaries helped launch an International Famine Relief Commission which raised money in China and abroad. At the same time the US President, Woodrow Wilson, appointed an American famine relief committee. Its chairman, a prominent banker called Thomas Lamont, collected US \$4.6 million in America alone.<sup>6</sup> Altogether 37 million Mexican dollars (the currency of China's foreign trade) were raised, much of it from Western sources. The International Famine Relief Commission thought that its efforts were so successful that, of the nine and half million who might have died, only half a million perished.

Even so the famines continued. M. H. Hutton wrote of his journey in 1924 from Sichuan to Guizhou province: 'The famine conditions in this province are heartrending... Dogs feasting on human flesh. Skeletons in thousands to be seen everywhere. As we journeyed over the road, over and over again our chairbearers had to carry us over dead bodies of people who had died on the road. One very sad sight was a poor victim kneeling before an idol shrine – dead.'<sup>7</sup> For many of those who became involved with China in the first half of this century, witnessing famine became the defining experience. One such was Edgar Snow, the American journalist who first interviewed Mao Zedong in his guerrilla base in Yanan, a famine-stricken region in Shaanxi province. (Ironically, Snow would return to China during the Great Leap Forward in 1960 and deny that a real famine was then taking place.) During the great famine which struck north-west China in 1927 and affected 60 million people, he travelled with a New Zealander, Rewi Alley, who would stay on in China and become an acolyte of Mao. At the time Edgar Snow wrote this moving description of what he witnessed:

*Have you ever seen a man – a good honest man who has worked hard, a 'law-abiding citizen', doing no serious harm to anyone – when he has had no food for more than a month? It is a most agonising sight. His dying flesh hangs from him in wrinkled folds; you can clearly see every bone in his body: his eyes stare out unseeing; and even if he is a youth of twenty he moves like an ancient crone, dragging himself from spot to spot. If he has been lucky he has long ago sold his wife and daughters. He has sold everything he owns, the timber of his house itself, and most of his clothes. Sometimes he has, indeed, even sold the last rag of decency, and he sways there in the scorching sun, his testicles dangling from him like withered olive seeds – the last grim jest to remind you that this was once a man.*

*Children are even more pitiable, with their little skeletons bent over and misshapen, their crooked bones, their little arms like twigs, and their purpling bellies, filled with bark and sawdust, protruding like tumours. Women lie slumped in corners, waiting for death, their black blade-like buttocks protruding, their breasts hanging like collapsed sacks. But there are, after all, not many women and girls. Most of them died or had been sold.*

*The shocking thing was that in many of those towns there were still rich men, rice hoarders, wheat hoarders, money-lenders, and landlords, with armed guards to defend them, while they profiteered enormously. The shocking thing was that in the cities – where officials danced or played with sing-song girls – there was grain and food, and had been for months.<sup>8</sup>*

Snow estimated that between 3 and 6 million perished in this famine. The sight of the starving was one horror but there were others. Human flesh was traded. Boys were sold as adopted sons. Girls were sold as wives, concubines, slave-girls or prostitutes. The 1927 report of the Peking United International Famine Relief Committee stated that 'in many districts, the children sold during the famine were reckoned by the thousands... Shijiazhuang [a city south-west of Beijing] was found to be one of the largest centres of the traffic. One of the workers in the famine field speaks of the contrast seen on the same day between a train of cars loaded with grain going out to relieve the people and a car filled with girls, who had been bought out in the country and were being brought to the railway station.'<sup>9</sup> Another report by Walter H. Mallory described what the starving peasants ate: 'flour made with ground leaves, fuller's earth, flower seed, poplar buds, corn cobs, *hongqing cha* [steamed balls of wild herbs], sawdust, thistles, leaf dust, poisonous tree beans, sorghum husks, cotton seed, elm bark, beancakes, sweet potato vines, roots, pumice stone ground into flour...'<sup>10</sup>

Both Chinese and foreign experts argued that if in the long term famines were to be prevented then communications must be improved. In India the British had been able to end endemic famine. As the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* stated: 'the greatest administrative achievement of the last 20 years has been the extension of communications. Railways have revolutionised relief. The final horror of famine, an absolute dearth of food, is not known.' China's tragedy was that it had far fewer railways than India. If there was a surplus in one part of the country and a famine in another, it was impossible to transport grain from the one to the other. Yet, as the 1925 annual report of the China International Famine Relief Commission noted, 'in such a vast country there is such a range of climate that a crop failure in all the provinces simultaneously is almost impossible. Even though four or five provinces are without a harvest there are still seventeen or eighteen where there is a yield and some of them are almost sure to have a bumper crop.'

Past dynasties had tried to solve the problem by digging the Grand Canal to ship grain by barge from the south to the north. Grain could travel, too, along the major rivers. But in large parts of the country the only mode of transporting grain was on a man's back. Animals were too valuable to use. In the 1920s China, with an area as big as the United States, had less than 2,000 miles of roads. Both men and goods were carried by coolies up and down hills and along narrow tracks for days on end. One reporter in China recorded that even if farmers in the interior of China gave their grain to mill owners in Shanghai for nothing, it would still be cheaper for the millers to buy American grain and ship it across the Pacific than to transport it across China.<sup>11</sup>

The Qing dynasty had been reluctant to allow foreigners to build many railways, and after its downfall the new republic was too unstable and too short of resources to fund major roadbuilding or railway schemes. Aside from the main river valleys and the coastal belt, the vast interior of China is mountainous, making it costly to construct roads. Yet without good communications it was impossible to create a commercial grain market. Even successful farmers found that the cards were always stacked against them. Prices fluctuated wildly and since most peasants were smallholders, they possessed little capital and were unable to borrow cheaply. The peasant had to sell immediately after the harvest when prices were low while the trader could hold stocks until prices were high. To finance the period between sowing and harvest, the peasant often borrowed money. Local landlords and dealers would charge 60 per cent interest on mortgaged land, 30 per cent on money loans and 50 per cent on grain. Many farmers were perennially in debt as John Ridley, correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, observed: 'The average Chinese farmer has a holding of one or two acres. Half of everything he grows is turned over to the landlord. Bad communications make production for a wide market impossible. The farmer has no incentive to put more land under the plough and increase the yield when he is unable to sell the additional produce. Primitive transport by oxen, mules or human beings is so slow that it is expensive as compared with railway charges.'

The famines also prompted the first research into peasant life. Professor John Lossing Buck, an American academic, established a team at Nanjing University which produced detailed surveys of Chinese agriculture, while his wife Pearl S. Buck won the Nobel Prize for Literature for *The Good Earth*, the story of an Anhui peasant who is driven from his land by drought and famine. Researchers began to realize that famine was not just a periodic crisis but a permanent state for tens of millions. In *Land and Labour in China*, published in 1932, R. H. Tawney wrote that 'there are in China districts in which the position of the rural population is that of a man standing permanently up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him.' Another writer, A. K. Norton, tried to calculate the numbers involved:



*It is estimated that thirty million Chinese are continually attempting to sustain life on less than the minimum required for subsistence. Thousands of these die daily; yet it is only when some great catastrophe such as a flood or a drought concentrates millions of starving in one area that we hear of a famine. Of the famine that is present every day we hear little: and the three million or more that die each year of starvation, due to lack of adjustment to changing conditions, are accepted as representing the normal mortality of the Chinese people.*<sup>12</sup>

Westerners argued that peasant agriculture must be modernized if China was to feed herself. A thousand years earlier China had been at the forefront of farming technology; now she was regarded as primitive. Many peasants were too poor to use draught animals and pulled a plough themselves. The ploughs were made of wood, not metal, and they barely scratched the surface of the soil. In places the peasants did not even use a plough but broke up the soil by hitting it with a wooden instrument shaped like a hoe. The Chinese peasant, observed one writer, was ‘twin brother to the ox’.

The land itself was easily exhausted because there was not enough fertilizer, and land was too scarce and too highly taxed for it to be left fallow. After the harvest, the peasants would strip their land of every piece of straw to burn as fuel because there was no coal or wood, and instead used human waste to fertilize the soil. Englishmen travelling up the Grand Canal in the mid-nineteenth century had been astonished to see peasants running after them to take their faeces: ‘Whenever servants and soldiers left the junks, they would be pursued to their places of retirement with receptacles to collect manure for their fields.’

Before 1949 it was reckoned that in Britain one person could grow enough food for himself and four urban dwellers but in China it took four farmers to produce enough for themselves and one city-dweller. If only China could reach the same rate of productivity as Britain, she could easily feed herself. Yet plans to modernize Chinese agricultural methods, rationalize ownership, provide cheap credit through co-operatives and build roads, railways, irrigation canals and dykes, were frustrated by the greatest problem of all – political instability.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Empress Dowager Ci Xi crushed efforts to modernize the country, fearing that it would open the door to foreign influences that would undermine the remaining authority of the imperial court. In 1911 the Qing dynasty was overthrown and China became a republic. Yet the opportunity to modernize foundered once more when power was seized by one of her generals, Yuan Shikai, who tried to establish a new dynasty. After his death in 1916, the empire disintegrated into a mass of fiefdoms run by warlords, and the central government was reduced to impotence. By 1928, however, a new ruling party had risen to power, the Nationalists or Kuomintang (KMT).

The KMT had been founded as a revolutionary party by Sun Yat-sen with the support of Marxists sent from Moscow who also nurtured the birth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Strongly nationalist and anti-imperialist, the KMT attempted to unite China and to import Western scientific ideas and methods of government. In 1925 Sun died and the KMT fell under the control of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. The following year he launched the Northern expedition to suppress the warlords. However, he was soon faced with another threat to his power in the shape of the growing Communist Party. Initially, it had functioned as a branch of the KMT but it soon began to establish itself as a rival.

Lenin himself believed that to become Communist, China must first pass through a stage of bourgeois revolution, but after his death the Chinese Communists took a different tack. In 1927 they launched a series of agrarian and urban uprisings against the KMT. In response Chiang Kai-shek turned on the Communists and destroyed their urban organizations, especially in Shanghai. Thereafter the Communists became a largely agrarian movement controlling small areas, or soviets, in the mountains, often on the intersection of provincial borders. In 1930 Chiang Kai-shek launched the first of several campaigns to eradicate these soviets and, in 1934, encircled the largest stronghold, finally forcing the Communists to break out in what has since become known as the Long March. On this epic journey Mao Zedong seized control and led his dwindling band to a new base in Yanan on the borders of Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces.

The Nationalists were never able to establish proper control of China. The most important coastal cities such as Shanghai were run by the foreign powers. In Manchuria, the Japanese imperial army set up a puppet state, Manchukuo, and from 1937 invaded China south of the Great Wall, forcing the Nationalists to retreat. The capital was moved from Nanjing inland to Chongqing in Sichuan province and the Nationalists steadily lost control over most of China. During the Second World War, the Communists infiltrated behind Japanese lines and established their grip over the rural hinterlands in the north. After Japan’s defeat, civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists broke out once more and the Nationalists were finally defeated in 1949, retreating to the island of Taiwan.

Between 1912 and 1949, the shifting alliances of the warlords and, later, the constant movement of armies, whether Communist, Nationalist or Japanese, reduced many parts of China to near anarchy and starvation. Millions of landless or impoverished peasants enlisted in the armies of local bandits and warlords or in the forces established by the Communists and Nationalists. A study of Shandong province in 1930 estimated that there were 192,000 regular troops and an additional 310,000 militia and bandits living off the countryside.<sup>13</sup> An earlier report, produced in 1929 by the International Famine Relief Commission in western China, concluded that famine was less the result of natural disasters than of man-made events. The millions of armed men in China fed themselves by seizing food from the peasants, taking their sons and animals, and demanding taxes years or even generations in advance. If the peasants refused to pay, then the troops would seize their entire belongings, creating more desperate men whose only recourse was banditry. Wherever the troops went there was starvation: ‘the famine areas corresponded almost exactly to the main billet areas and lines of march of the armies retreating from, and advancing to, the civil wars in the East’.

The American Red Cross drew the same conclusions about a famine in north-west China which began in 1929. It started with a severe drought but the ensuing destitution was caused by the ‘crushing exactions of the warlords, the depredations of bandits and the enforced payment of confiscatory taxation’. The solution, it said, lay in the establishment of a strong, stable central government which could ‘command the power and resources and continuity of policy necessary to lead China out of her condition of disorder into a new era of peace, security and prosperity’. It predicted that ‘disastrous conditions leading to continued suffering will constantly recur until such a government comes into being’.

In the spring of 1943, an American reporter for *Time* magazine, Theodore White, was covering the war between the Japanese and Nationalist armies in Henan province, central China. Millions were fleeing the Japanese advance but White discovered to his horror that it was not the fighting itself which was killing most people but hunger. ‘The blood was not my chief distress – it was my inability to make sense of what I was seeing. In a famine where no one kills but nature, there are no marks on the body where people die: nature itself is the enemy – and only government can save from nature. I could not understand this at the beginning.’

White, who later became the doyen of political reporters in America, was convinced that it would be the Communists, not the Nationalists, who would eventually provide this stable government. In his book, *In Search of History*, he described how the Nationalists dealt with the famine in Henan. At the time he was staying with a Catholic bishop and missionary in Luo-yang, the province’s capital.

*Missionaries left their compound only when necessary for a white man walking in the street was the only agent of hope and was assailed by wasted men, frail women, children, people head-knocking on the ground, grovelling, kneeling, begging for food, wailing ‘K’o lien, k’o lien’*

*(‘Mercy, mercy’) but pleading really only for food. The handful of missionaries who staked out the Christian underground in the area of famine were the only thread of sense – the sense that life is precious.*

*What we saw, I now no longer believe... There were the bodies: the first, no more than an hour out of Luoyang, lying in the snow, a day or two dead, her face shrivelled about her skull: she must have been young; and the snow fell on her eyes; and she would lie unburied until the birds or the dogs cleansed her bones. The dogs were also there along the road, slipping back to their wolf kinship, and they were sleek, well fed. We stopped to take a picture of dogs digging bodies from sand piles; some were half-eaten, but the dogs had already picked clean one visible skull. Half the villages were deserted; some simply abandoned, others already looted. To hear a sound or see a person in such a village was startling; an old man tottering through the street all by himself; or in another village, two women shrieking at each other with no one else in sight, where normally there would be a crowd to watch them scold – and what were they arguing about in death?*

*White found, too, that hunger had driven the peasants to break the ultimate taboo.*

*So I saw these things, but the worst was what I heard, which was about cannibalism. I never saw any man kill another person for meat, and never tasted human flesh. But it seemed irrefutably true that people were eating people meat. The usual defence was that the people meat was taken from the dead. Case after case which we tried to report presented this defence. In one village a mother was discovered boiling her two-year-old to eat its meat. In another case a father was charged with strangling his two boys to eat them; his defence was that they were already dead. A serious case in one village; the army had insisted that the peasants take in destitute children and an eight-year-old had been imposed on a peasant family. Then he disappeared. And on investigating, his bones were discovered by the peasant’s shack, in a big crock. The question was only whether the boy had been eaten after he died or had been killed to be eaten later. In two hours in the village, we could not determine the justice of the matter; anyone might have been lying; so we rode on.<sup>14</sup>*

White believed that this misery was caused not by war but by poor government. The Nationalists were relentless in collecting taxes to finance the war and since they did not trust the paper money that they issued as currency, the armies in the field were instructed to gather taxes in kind, mostly by seizing grain. White discovered that in Henan the Nationalist army had tried to collect more grain than the land produced. The troops had emptied the countryside of food, leaving the populace with nothing to eat. Peasants were forced to sell their animals, tools and homes. At the same time the civilian administration was trying to levy its own taxes.

He also noticed that where army units were under strength, the army storehouses bulged with surplus grain which the officers sold for their own profit. This was the grain which the missionaries and honest officials bought to feed the starving. In Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek’s administration responded to reports of famine by declaring that it would remit the tax on next year’s grain harvest. Since this did not exist the gesture was meaningless; and the funds that it sent were equally useless because the paper currency had no value.

White returned to Chongqing and found that Chiang had little knowledge of, or interest in, the famine. The various layers of bureaucracy had effectively shielded him from the facts. White finally managed to force an audience with the Generalissimo and showed him photographs of the starving and of wild dogs standing over corpses. Only then did Chiang believe him and take measures to end the famine. Trainloads of grain arrived from neighbouring Shaanxi province, the army opened its stores in Henan and the provincial government set up soup kitchens. The famine abated, although cholera and typhus still claimed many. In all at least 5 million are thought to have perished although even today no one knows the precise figure.

The devastation caused by the Japanese invaders, the callousness of the Nationalists and endemic famine were, White believed, destroying traditional Chinese society:

*What was left was not a society, but a spongelike mass, a honeycomb of mashed cells in most of which some sting was left. Some villages supported the Nationalists, others the provincial government, and yet others supported the Communists – but they supported whoever could serve their need of protection best, who could save their women from rape by the Japanese, their men from impressment as coolies. The Japanese had come to kill; the Communists were the most efficient counterkillers.<sup>15</sup>*

After the Japanese surrender in 1945, the Nationalists became the official government of China, yet the terrible famines continued. In 1946 famine gripped nineteen provinces and at least 20 million were starving. The British journalist John Ridley recorded what he saw in the same province, Henan: ‘It was a ghastly experience walking through those towns and villages. All around was the dreadful apathy of people slowly dying of hunger and disease who watched you, dull as cattle, their eyes large, luminous and sad in putty coloured skeletal faces. As you wandered among the ruined mud-brick houses there was always the stench of death.’

While he was walking through one village a boy fell down in front of him: ‘lying on the road he was a pathetic little figure, his stomach hideously distended, his face gaunt and pallid, his limbs thin and fragile as a bird’s skeleton’. Ridley picked him up and carried him to a nearby hospital. Half an hour later the boy died without recovering consciousness. ‘He died of starvation. We get dozens like him brought here every week,’ a hospital doctor told Ridley. Throughout the province, people were subsisting on grass, roots, leaves and even human flesh, and children were abandoned or sold for a handful of grain.<sup>16</sup>

A mere twelve years later Henan province would embrace Mao’s Great Leap Forward and his promise to end starvation for ever with more enthusiasm than any other part of China.

Yet the famine which followed the Great Leap Forward would be the greatest that the world had ever witnessed. To understand why one must first look at how the Chinese themselves proposed to banish hunger in the land of famine.

## *Arise, Ye Prisoners of Starvation*

‘In China what is called inequality between poor and rich is only a distinction between the very poor and the less poor.’ Sun Yat-sen

‘Arise, ye prisoners of starvation, Arise, ye wretched of the earth’ The ‘Internationale’

Revolution, democracy, freedom, Communism – all meant one thing to the peasants: the redistribution of the land. From earliest times, peasants had joined rebellions confident that the victors would divide up all the land and reallocate it. At the start of a new dynasty, the Emperor would invariably annul all debts, taxes, land leases and contracts. Even the graves of the old era would be ploughed under. The soldiers of the new emperor would be rewarded with a choice of the best land and the supporters of the old regime would lose theirs. The population explosion that occurred under the Qing dynasty, and the increasing shortage of land that it created, fuelled the peasants’ age-old desire for change. Their opportunity came with the rise of the Taipings who, in rebelling against the Qing, promised to establish the ‘land system of the Heavenly Kingdom’. Land would be given to those who tilled it and would be shared out equitably among all the families of the Taiping supporters according to family size.<sup>1</sup> The founders of the Heavenly Kingdom also envisaged a proto-Communist state in which all food surplus to daily requirements would be kept in great common granaries while social order would be ensured by a ‘sergeant’ appointed to oversee the doings of units made up of twenty-five families.

The Taipings were crushed in 1864 but when the Qing dynasty was finally overthrown in the 1911 Republican Revolution, the peasants still hoped that there would be a great redistribution of land. They were disappointed and gained little from the dynasty’s downfall, but the new rulers of China continued to promise that soon the land would be redistributed. Sun Yat-sen declared that ‘those who till the land should have the land’ and called his programme the ‘equalization of land ownership’. Before his death the Nationalists made the land question a central plank in their political programme. In 1924 the Declaration of the First National Congress of the KMT stated:

*China is an agricultural country and the peasants are the class that has suffered most. The Kuomintang stands for the policy that those peasants who have no land and consequently have fallen into the status of mere tenants should be given land by the State for their cultivation. The State shall also undertake the work of irrigation and of opening up the waste land so as to increase the power of production of the land. Those peasants who have no capital and are compelled to borrow at high rates of interest and are in debt for life should be supplied by the State with credit by the establishment of rural banks. Only then will the peasants be able to enjoy the happiness of life.*

While they were still in partnership with the Communists, the Nationalists set up a Peasant Movement Training Institute in which Mao Zedong, the son of a peasant landlord from Hunan, soon became heavily involved. In 1924 he was elected an alternate member of the KMT’s Central Executive Committee and appointed Principal of the Institute. Perhaps more than anyone else in the Chinese Communist Party he argued that ‘the peasant question is the central question in the national revolution’. The founders of the Chinese Communist Party were largely urban intellectuals with access to Western ideas who had studied events in Europe, especially in Russia. When they set up the Party they gave it a name in Chinese which would appeal to the peasants – the Gong Chan Dang, the ‘share property party’. However, the orthodox Marxist view was that the workers – the urban proletariat – would be the advance guard of the revolution. Mao, on the other hand, believed that in China it would be the peasants who would bring the Party to power. As he later told the American journalist Edgar Snow, ‘Whoever wins the peasants will win China. Whoever solves the land question will win the peasants.’

So in the countryside the Communists promised land reform, the equitable redistribution of land, the abolition of taxes and the cancellation of debts. And unlike the Nationalists, they not only promised this but also put it into effect in the areas that fell under their control. As Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State, observed in 1948 when the Nationalists were facing defeat, ‘Much of the propaganda of the Chinese Communists is built on the promise that they will solve the land question... the KMT has attempted to solve the problem by formulating land reform decrees but some of these have failed and others have been neglected.’<sup>2</sup> The promise to provide equal shares of land to all brought the popular support which allowed the Communists to operate in rural areas and to enlist landless peasants in their armies. In a famous report on the peasants in his home province, written in 1927, Mao predicted that ‘in a very short time, several hundred million peasants in China’s central, southern and northern provinces will rise like a tornado or tempest – a force so extraordinarily swift that no power, however great, will be able to suppress it. They will break through all the trammels that now bind them and push forward along the road to liberation.’<sup>3</sup>

In implementing their own land reform decrees, the Nationalists were hamstrung by their dependency on warlords who controlled many parts of the country and who in turn drew their support from the local landlords and gentry. Yet those with property, even if they were nothing more than peasant smallholders, were horrified by the violent redistribution of wealth that the Communists enforced. In the Red soviets that the Party established, landlords and their families were brutally murdered and all that they owned was distributed among the have-nots.

Most rural Chinese were neither rich nor landless but subsisted in a series of subtle gradations of poverty. However, Marxist theory held that there were three distinct classes of peasants: rich, middle and poor. For the Chinese Communists operating in the countryside, the key question was what to do about the middle peasants. They might be led to think they would gain from a redistribution of property. Or, since they possessed some property, they might support the Nationalists if they feared it would be taken away, and if they believed that the Nationalists would provide stable government. On this issue the Communists were fortunate because the Republic’s authorities manifestly failed to carry out the duties expected in a society with an intensely paternalistic tradition of government. After the fall of the Manchus, the state granaries were neglected or closed and the grain sold for money which was pocketed by the warlords. So there were no reserves in times of famine. The authorities also failed to remit taxes when harvests failed, as tradition dictated, and the taxes raised were not spent on maintaining dykes and embankments. The Nationalists thus broke a social contract between the peasants and their rulers that dated back to the earliest dynasties, thereby sowing the seeds of their eventual defeat.

Yet the Communists had no intention of re-establishing a feudal dynasty: they wanted to create something new. The Chinese Communist Party was controlled by leaders and advisers who were largely trained in Moscow and who wanted to implement the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Stalin.<sup>4</sup> In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx had not envisaged a country of peasant smallholders but rather an agricultural system modelled on factories. He wrote of ‘the abolition of property in land... the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan. The establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture. The combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries: the gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country.’



When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia after 1917, they divided up the land but then soon set about taking it away again to create the giant factory-farms which Marx had proposed. Some were state farms and some were huge collectives called *kolkhozi*. Knowing that the peasants wanted their own land and had no desire to be part of some Utopian scheme, the Russian revolutionaries despised them. The founder of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov, described the Russian peasants as ‘barbarian tillers of the soil, cruel and merciless, beasts of burden whose life provided no opportunity for the luxury of thought’, and Maxim Gorky, a writer much favoured by the Bolsheviks, accused the peasants of an ‘animal-like individualism’ and an ‘almost total lack of social consciousness’. Lenin himself liked to quote Marx on the ‘idiocy of rural life’ and said that the peasant, ‘far from being an instinctive or traditional collectivist, is in fact meanly and fiercely individualistic’. Indeed, he believed the peasant smallholder was inherently and irredeemably capitalist, that ‘day by day, hour by hour, small scale [agricultural] production is engendering capitalism’. The peasants might be useful at an initial stage – after all Marx had said that a proletarian revolution might be supported by a new version of the sixteenth-century German peasant wars – but their interests were different. In 1905, Lenin wrote in *Two Tactics for Democracy* that though initially there would be a ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’ this was no more than a tactical move. Later it would be ‘ridiculous to speak of unity of will of the proletariat and peasantry, of democratic rule; then we shall have to think of the socialist, of the proletarian dictatorship.’

The theories that the Chinese Communists learned in Moscow and from advisers such as Borodin and Otto Braun were based on an analysis of feudalism which existed in Europe and Russia in the last century. When the future leaders of China, men such as Deng Xiaoping or Liu Shaoqi, studied at the ‘University of the Toilers of the East’, their textbooks referred to the liberation of the serfs, the overthrow of the landed aristocracy and the break-up of vast feudal estates in Germany, France or Russia. China was quite different, as both eighteenth-century Jesuit missionaries and scholars such as R. H. Tawney, writing in the 1920s, pointed out.<sup>5</sup> There was no landed aristocracy, no dominant clan of Junkers or squires, no feudal land law, no great estates worked by corvée labour. And, unlike in Europe, there were no commons, pastures or forests in public hands. Ministry of Agriculture statistics produced in 1918 showed that in China there was a higher percentage of peasant proprietors in the farming population than in Germany, Japan or the United States. In China, 51.6 per cent were owner-occupiers and a further 22.8 per cent owned part of their farmland while renting the remainder.

Again and again observers stressed the attachment of the Chinese peasantry to the land they owned. A German count travelling in China in the last century wrote: ‘There is no other peasantry in the world which gives such an impression of absolute genuineness and of belonging so much to the soil. Here the whole of life and the whole of death takes place on the inherited ground. Man belongs to the soil, not the soil to man; it will never let its children go.’<sup>6</sup> The Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, writing in the late 1930s, further observed: ‘Honour, ambition, devotion, social approval are all thus linked up with the land. The villagers judge a person as good or bad according to his industry in working the land. A badly weeded farm, for instance, will give a bad reputation to the owner. The incentive to work is thus deeper than hunger.’ As long as a peasant owned his land he felt secure: ‘The relative inexhaustibility of the land gives people a relative security. Although there are bad years, the land never disillusiones the people completely, since hope for plenty in the future remains and is not infrequently realised.’<sup>7</sup>

In Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*, the central figure Wang Lung finds it incomprehensible that anyone, however destitute, should think of leaving the land. “‘Sell their land!’” repeated Wang Lung, convinced. “Then indeed are they growing poor. Land is one’s flesh and blood.”

Yet Lenin and Stalin had developed a theory of rural class struggle which the Chinese Communists were also to adopt and which ignored this relationship to the land in China. The rich and successful Russian peasants, the *kulaks*, were accused of exploiting the labour of others and of lending money at extortionate rates. The Russian Communists tried to enlist the poor peasants to overcome the *kulaks* who were the most influential group in the countryside and whose opposition to collectivization was the strongest. In May 1918 the Central Executive Committee in Russia considered that ‘We must place before ourselves most seriously the problem of dividing the village by classes. Of creating in it two opposite hostile camps, setting the poorest layers of the population against the *kulak* elements. Only if we are able to split the village into two camps, to arouse there the same class war as in the cities, only then will we achieve in the villages what we have achieved in the cities.’

The Russian Communists launched a ‘merciless war’ against the *kulaks* that culminated in their eradication during Stalin’s first five-year plan (1928–33) when the entire peasantry was collectivized. In December 1929 Stalin ordered the liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class and millions were killed or sent to labour camps. Such a policy was difficult to implement in China and was the subject of furious arguments among the Chinese Communist leadership. It was easy enough to enlist the most desperate and impoverished peasantry but who exactly were the middle peasants and the rich peasants? Did the Party need the support of the rich peasants or should they be dealt with later?

The Russians had found it hard enough to make clear distinctions and in China the issue was even more problematic during the 1930s. First, the Chinese Communists only controlled small regions and wanted the support of the entire rural population. Second, as Sun Yat-sen had said, all the peasants were poor and there was barely a distinction to be made between them. Before 1949, absentee landlords and landless peasants accounted for less than 10 per cent of the rural population, and tenants and hired labour accounted for only a small part of the rural labour force.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in many villages everyone belonged to the same one or two extended families or clans. Often the whole village shared the same family name. The clan patriarch usually had the most land and helped his relatives with credit or hired their sons when extra help was needed at harvest time. So an attack on the village clan chief risked turning the entire village against the Communists.

In Communist-controlled regions, Party officials set about categorizing each peasant household, designating them poor, middle or rich depending on how they were faring that year. The Party defined ‘landlords’ as the largest landowners, who rented out a significant proportion of their land and might also hire labourers to work the fields. A rich peasant worked part of his land himself but also hired labour. These two classes were labelled as members of the exploiting classes whose ill-gotten wealth was taken from the labour of tenants and hired labourers. A middle peasant had some land but also worked on the land of others. Poor peasants included those who owned and cultivated very small holdings as well as tenant farmers and part tenants.<sup>9</sup> Once fixed, these labels could not be changed and were passed down to the next generation. In 1931, while Mao and other Communist leaders were based in the mountains of Jiangxi province, they issued a land reform law which was ruthless though not quite as tough as that in the Soviet Union. Middle peasants could keep their own land but rich peasants would have theirs taken away and substituted with inferior land. Later, in drought-stricken and impoverished Yanan where under Mao’s leadership the Communists established a new base after 1935, Mao also insisted that Stalin’s ideas on class warfare should be embraced. Over the next fourteen years as the Party extended its power and influence to more and more areas, it enforced the same policies. The peasants were classified and often the clan chief or largest landowner was humiliated or murdered in a rally organized by Party cadres.

What is unclear from many historical accounts of the Party in these decades is whether class warfare was pursued in the villages with the same fanaticism and brutality as in the Soviet Union. Writers such as Edgar Snow, who visited Mao in Yanan, were sympathetic to the Party’s efforts to help the poor peasants. Others, such as William Hinton who wrote the history of a village in Shanxi province and Han Suyin, also tended to present a largely positive picture of land reform under the Communists. They convey the impression that any excesses in land reform were spontaneous episodes that

were regrettable but understandable given the justified anger of the peasants.

However, a number of Chinese histories of early land reform have appeared in recent years which claim that it was always designed to be a brutal campaign of terror targeting anyone with property.<sup>10</sup> In his 1927 report on the Hunan peasant movement, Mao explicitly said: 'We must create a short reign of terror in all parts of the countryside. A revolution is not like a dinner party, or composing an article, or doing embroidery, a revolution is an uprising.' Even in this early period, Party leaders ordered cadres to murder landlords and their supporters and to encourage looting and burning. And in a recent publication, *History of Land Reform in China, 1921-1949* by Zhao Xiaomin, it is claimed that 'some cadres who failed to carry out this policy resolutely were also killed'. According to the author, the policies of the Chinese Communists in 1931 were as brutal as those of Stalin in the Soviet Union, if not more so:

*From 1931 they obeyed the instructions of the Comintern that landlords should not be allowed any land but should just sit and wait for death. In China some were sent to do hard labour, some expelled from the area under Party control and some were killed. Just as in the USSR, kulaks were killed and all their property confiscated. The slogan was 'Kill all the rich peasants'.*

Another recent book, *Land Revolution Report, 1927-1937* by Tong Yingming, argues that the Chinese Communists had from the start tried to go further than the Russians. The author writes that after 1929 'when carrying out the collective farming system, the Chinese Communist Party tried to be more progressive than the Soviet Union. They opposed all private ownership of land, banned the sale of land and the hiring of labour, and opposed peasants and soldiers who wanted to own land.' He and others claim that even in the 1930s the land of the middle peasant was also redistributed but that the policies were softened when the Communists joined the war against the Japanese after 1937 and tried to form a united front with the Nationalists against the invaders. Landlords' property was no longer confiscated although money-lending rates were reduced.

After 1946, it was official policy to protect the rich and middle peasants when an area came under Communist control. A provisional law on land reform which was passed that year was moderate in theory but not in practice. Even those who worked their own land were often labelled as landlords. Those whose parents or grandparents were considered to have been landlords were killed, their ancestors' tombs dug up and their relatives tortured to discover if the family had hidden gold or silver. The Land Law formally adopted in 1948 appeared to protect the interests of middle peasants but in practice priority was given to satisfying the demands of poor peasants for more land as well as for possessions such as donkeys and carts.

Those who were to form the nucleus around Mao during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution had always been prominent in waging class warfare. Chen Boda, one of Mao's key advisers in both periods, carried out a study of land rent in 1945 entitled *Chinese Agriculture and the Classes in the Chinese Countryside*. It set out to justify the harsh measures employed by proving that exploitation of peasants by landlords and *kulaks* was rife.

Another key figure, Kang Sheng, who in the Cultural Revolution during the late 1960s would mastermind Mao's destruction of his opponents in the Party, took the lead in trying to exterminate the rich peasants. A biography of Kang, *Claws of the Dragon*, based on an internal Party document, describes a visit he paid to Gansu province in 1946 to inspect its land reform. He accused the provincial leadership there of 'right deviation' and on his return to Yanan gave a series of speeches at the central Party school decrying the tendency to be lenient towards landlords. The authors of the biography claim that 'Kang's formula translated into countless acts of revenge at village level. Instead of merely confiscating the landlords' houses and goods and dividing their land among the peasants and retainers, in the name of social justice, he encouraged the peasants to settle scores by killing landlords and rich peasants.'<sup>11</sup>

Kang then spent four months in a county in Shaanxi province where he also reviewed land reform and insisted that landlords be murdered as part of the programme. Such ruthlessness extended to Party supporters and Party cadres. In Lin county two wealthy landowners who had supported the Communists in the fight against the Japanese were subjected to brutal struggle sessions. Kang ordered that one of them called Niu (meaning cow) should have an iron ring put through his nose and be led on a rope through the streets by his son. At the same time, local Party members were investigated and those not of peasant or proletarian birth were abused and beaten in mass struggle sessions. Kang even insisted that any cadre of slightly better social origins than the rest must be made to eat at a separate table.

Official policy was to judge a landowner according to his record in exploiting hired labourers or poor peasants but Kang thought that this was too moderate. He declared that three other factors should be taken into consideration – 'history, life and political attitudes'. So broad were these criteria that they could be used to target anyone. In one village in this county, of the 552 households, 124 were classified as those of rich peasants. The victims had their land taken away and were publicly humiliated and beaten. Some were shot, beheaded or buried alive.

Although in public Mao argued against Kang's excesses, elsewhere he singled him out for praise for having overcome the 'right deviations' in this district. At a high-level Party conference on land reform held just before the Communist victory of 1949, Kang delivered a report urging a policy of 'thoroughly equal land distribution' that would reduce the land holdings of middle-class peasants. The conference approved a much tougher line than that taken during the partnership with the Nationalists against the Japanese and during the civil war. Kang was then assigned to inspect land reform in his native Shandong province and there too he discovered that the local Party represented a 'landlord and rich peasant Party'. The leading cadres were imprisoned and the Party secretary Li Yu was accused of following the 'rich peasant line' and detained for six months before being transferred to another, lowlier job.

In many places, rural reform consisted of gangs drawn from the dregs of village society who were organized to incite the peasants at mass meetings which ended with the land reform team leading shouts of 'Shoot him! Shoot him!' or 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' The brutality of the campaign was described in an American report drawn up by the Consul-General in Hong Kong which recounted what had happened in villages in Henan province in 1949. Those categorized as landlords were shot, hanged, beheaded, battered to death, nailed to the walls of buildings or buried alive. Sometimes, in winter, the victim was dressed in a thin cotton garment and water was poured over him while he stood outside in sub-zero temperatures. This method of death was called 'wearing glass clothes'. Burying victims alive in the snow was called 'refrigeration'. A third method was dubbed 'opening the flower'. The victim was buried in a pit with only his head exposed which was then smashed, laying open his brains.<sup>12</sup>

There are no figures on how many died in the land reform movement prior to 1949 but subsequently, when the Party controlled all of China, between 2 and 5 million landlords are thought to have been killed.<sup>13</sup> This 'red terror' enabled the Party to establish its control over the villages but it was not followed by a real collectivization programme. On the contrary, the redistribution of land pleased many peasants and the Party found it difficult to stop its peasant recruits from deserting their army units and returning to their villages after the process had begun.

Yet collectivization was always one of the goals of the Party once it had established power and it was always clear that the land being given to the peasants would be taken away again. Before 1949, the Party had distributed leaflets and pamphlets describing in glowing terms the success of the collective farms in the Soviet Union. Woodcuts showed tractors and combine-harvesters, which peasants in China had never seen, crisscrossing fields



and bringing in bumper harvests. One interviewee described how Party officials showed the peasants Soviet propaganda films:

*We always heard lots of propaganda about the communes in the USSR. There were always films about the fantastic combine-harvesters with people singing on the back on their way to work. In the films there were always mountains and mountains of food. So many films showed how happy life was on the collective farms. I remember scenes of happy, healthy schoolchildren in uniform. In the shots of the homes of the peasants on the collectives there was always lots of food.*

After 1949, delegations of peasants were sent on lengthy tours of the Ukraine and Kazakhstan to see model collectives with their own cinemas, bath houses and day-care centres. They ate in peasant homes from tables groaning with food and saw the ease with which fields were ploughed by tractors and harvests gathered in and threshed by modern machinery. Groups of village cadres returned from these study tours of Soviet collective farms filled with a desire to emulate the Russians. Yet the truth, as many in the Chinese Communist Party knew, was that collectivization had been a disaster in the Soviet Union. In attempting it, Stalin had created the worst famine in Russian history in which millions had perished, and the country was still not able to feed itself. The Ukraine famine of the early 1930s was in many ways the forerunner of what was to happen in China. Mao and his followers must have had some knowledge of the events described in the next chapter.





## The Soviet Famine

‘Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost – maybe even millions. I can’t give an exact figure because no one was keeping count. All we knew was that people were dying in enormous numbers.’ Nikita Khrushchev

‘The Soviet Union’s today is China’s tomorrow.’ Mao Zedong

The origins of Mao’s great famine lie as much in Russian as in Chinese history. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire was racked by such severe famines that Lenin was encouraged to think that a revolution was inevitable. He and his followers believed that peasant demands for land would help destroy the social order. However, the crisis in the countryside was partly defused by the reforms of an energetic minister of the Tsar, P. A. Stolypin, who from 1906 introduced agricultural reforms that met some of the demands for more land, thereby creating a class of prosperous peasants.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the disappointed Bolshevik faction under Lenin redirected their activities towards exploiting the revolutionary potential of the growing urban proletariat. Nonetheless, when finally military defeat in the First World War led to the collapse of the Tsarist regime in 1917, Russia’s Marxist revolutionaries still needed the support of the peasantry, who constituted the great majority of the recruits in the Tsarist armies. The revolutionaries promised these peasant soldiers that the land would be divided up. In consequence many deserted their units and returned to their villages in order to obtain their share.

However, once Lenin and his followers had consolidated their grip over the cities, it soon became clear that they did not have the interests of the peasants at heart. Within a few months of seizing power, they introduced measures that would bring about the first famine in the new state. In May 1918 a decree was issued empowering the Commissariat of Food to extract from the peasants any grain held in excess of the quotas that it set. In the name of ‘War Communism’, teams of politically reliable workers arrived in the countryside to seize the surplus grain. The peasants refused to hand it over and staged uprisings that were only put down with much bloodshed. The Communist Party then resorted to waging class warfare in the countryside, trying to enlist the poorest peasants in its struggle against the rich *kulaks* and grain hoarders. Millions perished or fled their homes while grain production fell steeply to half what it had been before 1914. Within three years the entire country was starving and in 1921 the Communist government was forced to appeal for international aid. A massive relief effort was undertaken and, at one stage, the American Relief Administration and other foreign aid organizations were feeding over 10 million mouths. Even so some believe that one-tenth of the population perished from hunger in the midst of a brutal civil war. Finally, a rebellion by sailors at Kronstadt forced Lenin to make a tactical retreat. He introduced his New Economic Policy to create a ‘breathing space’ for the Party, replacing grain requisitioning with taxes and reopening food markets as part of a massive retreat from the moneyless and propertyless Utopia that he had tried to create after 1918.

In a famous speech in 1923, one of Lenin’s colleagues Nikolay Bukharin promised a new deal for the peasantry: ‘To the peasants, we must say “Enrich yourselves, develop your farms, and do not fear that restrictions will be placed on you.”’ However paradoxical it may appear, we must develop the well-to-do farm in order to help the poor peasant and the middle peasant.’ Nearly sixty years later Deng Xiaoping was to use almost the same words when he abolished Mao’s communes and told the Chinese peasants that ‘to get rich is glorious’. As a result of the New Economic Policy, agricultural production in the Soviet Union returned to pre-1914 levels.

After Lenin’s death in 1924, however, Stalin made a second attempt to realize Marx’s schemes for giant factory-farms. In 1928 he repealed the New Economic Policy and launched the first five-year plan, which was to be the model for Mao’s Great Leap Forward. This was a gigantic crash industrialization campaign in which Stalin wanted to double steel output and triple both pig-iron and tractor production within five years. The investment for industrialization was to come from squeezing the peasants, and this could only be done if they were brought under control in collective farms.

In the Kremlin, a bitter power struggle ensued as Stalin ousted his rivals and silenced opposition to his plan. He attacked Bukharin for restoring capitalism in the countryside and later had him put on trial and shot. Those who had voiced support for Bukharin’s view that collectivization should be a gradual process of persuasion were also silenced. Stalin’s collectivization campaign, which began in 1929, was violent, brutal and sudden. Overnight, small peasant holdings were merged into collectives – giant farms covering as much as 247,000 acres (100,000 hectares). Stalin claimed that these collective farms would create a new world of plenty: ‘In some three years’ time, our country will have become one of the richest granaries, if not the richest, in the whole world.’ Tractors operating in immense fields of grain were supposed to double grain yields, while on the new factory-farms the output of milk, butter, cheese and meat would quadruple. A new life would begin for the peasants, too. They would move out of their medieval villages into modern ‘socialist agro-towns’ in each of which 44,000 people would inhabit skyscrapers with ‘flats, libraries, restaurants, reading rooms and gymnasiums’. In the collectives, money was not altogether abolished but wages were, because the peasant now earned work points. The local Party secretary would calculate the value of these accumulated points and then pay the peasant a share of the collective’s output. In an effort to abolish private property peasants were in many places incited to destroy their own possessions, including their eating utensils, and were encouraged to eat in collective dining-rooms and to live in dormitories. As Marx had foreseen in his *Manifesto*, the peasants were also organized in industrial-type armies or at least their activities were described using military jargon. So they worked in ‘brigades’ or were dispatched to ‘agricultural fronts’; in emergencies they acted as ‘shock troops’ or ‘shock workers’.

Inevitably, the peasants violently resisted these edicts and from 1929 onwards there were armed rebellions in the countryside. To justify his harsh counter-measures, Stalin alleged that the cities were short of food because the peasants were hoarding grain, speculating with it and resisting procurement as an act of sabotage. In fact, they were merely reluctant to sell to the state because procurement prices were set too low. The forcible seizure of grain was resumed as was the war against the *kulaks*, who were expelled from their villages and killed or deported to labour camps. To whip up mass hysteria against the rich peasants, the Party used the ‘Committees of Poor Peasants’ which it had organized in the villages after 1918. Just who was a *kulak* and who was not, was left deliberately vague. Technically, the term applied to anyone who used hired labour or gave credit to his neighbours, and it extended to wives and children, but anyone could be labelled a *kulak* at the discretion of the local Party.

The peasants responded by defending themselves with whatever weapons they had or by destroying their own property, burning their grain and slaughtering their animals. Much of the country’s livestock died during the collectivization and for a while peasants gorged themselves on meat, eating until they could eat no more. The Kazakhs and other nomadic tribes with herds of livestock were forcibly settled and in the process most of the herds

died. As a result a quarter of the Kazakh population starved to death.

To stop the peasants destroying their animals and farms, Stalin decreed that all collective property including cattle, standing crops and other agricultural produce as well as agricultural implements now belonged to the state. Anyone damaging such state property was ‘a saboteur’, ‘a wrecker’ and ‘an enemy of the people’ to whom no mercy could be shown. As millions tried to flee their villages, Stalin introduced what was called the internal passport. At entrance points to all cities, police set up checkpoints to inspect these registration documents. Those who were not registered as city-dwellers were turned back and only those with an urban registration could obtain grain ration cards. The peasants were forbidden to leave their villages without permission, just as they had been when they were serfs.

Collectivization was also the signal for a massive assault on all aspects of peasant life, and Stalin and others talked of launching a cultural revolution. Religion was outlawed, the clergy arrested, the churches closed and turned into storerooms or barns. The state also set about erasing all aspects of ethnic identity among the Ukrainians and other subject peoples of the former Russian empire.

In 1930 there was a pause during which Stalin condemned the excesses of collectivization, accusing some cadres of ‘left deviation’ in abandoning the ‘Leninist principle of voluntarian-ism’ and of being ‘dizzy with success’. For a brief period peasants could leave the collective farms, but it was not long before they were forced to rejoin them. At the same time, the Soviet Union doubled its grain exports to raise hard currency to buy equipment needed for industrialization. As Nikita Khrushchev later said of Stalin and his colleagues: ‘Their method was like this. They sold grain abroad, while in some regions people were swollen with hunger and even dying for lack of bread.’

Just as in China thirty years later, the forced seizure of grain by the state was the greatest cause of the famine that now followed collectivization. In the Soviet Union this took place from 1931 to 1933 when the Party deliberately and consciously took all the grain it could from the peasants. Cadres suppressed accurate figures on the harvest and replaced them with inflated and spurious calculations based on the ‘biological yield’: in other words they guessed at the size of the harvest by looking at the grain growing in the fields. Even those farms that met their initial quotas were merely assigned supplementary quotas until there was no grain left. To stiffen the resolve of the rural cadres, Moscow dispatched 25,000 urban workers to the countryside. Later, more workers were brought from factories to harvest the grain and till the soil. On average, the peasants were left with a third less grain than they had had between 1926 and 1930 but the food shortages were at their most acute in the Soviet Union’s richest grain-growing areas – the Ukraine, the lower reaches of the Volga and the northern Caucasus. It is also now clear that Stalin used the ensuing famine to extinguish Ukrainian nationalism and to crush the rebellious Cossacks, dismissing as ‘right opportunist capitulators’ those officials who truthfully reported the existence of famine in these regions. Any cadre who refused to participate in the grain seizures was arrested and found guilty of ‘right opportunism’ and a campaign against rightists was elevated to the ‘main struggle’ in the country.

In 1931, Stalin allowed relief grain to be delivered to drought-stricken areas and took other steps to alleviate the suffering caused by famine in all regions except the Ukraine. Instead, officials there went from house to house, ripping up the walls and floors and testing the ground for hidden reserves to find grain to meet procurement quotas. As one participant, Lev Kopolev, wrote in *The Education of a True Believer*: ‘I took part in this myself, scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain, testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to hidden grain. With the others I emptied out the old folks’ storage chests, stopping my ears to the children’s crying and the women’s wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the transformation of the countryside.’ A peasant victim of the campaign later testified at a US Congressional investigation in 1988 that officials ‘would walk all over our fields, probing the latter with sharp pikes. The pike was jammed into the ground and pulled up. If any grains of wheat were picked up, the conclusion was that grain was being hidden from the state. The men with pikes went everywhere.’

When the Ukrainian peasants became desperate in their search for food, militia were deployed to guard the grain stores and protect shipments of grain. Then Stalin issued a new law, ‘On Safeguarding Socialist Property’. It authorized the death penalty for anyone stealing even an ear of wheat and in the first year of its enactment, 1932, 20 per cent of all persons sentenced in Soviet courts were convicted under it. Eyewitnesses said that in the midst of the famine peasants knew that their grain was being transported through the starving countryside and shipped out of Ukrainian ports.

Lev Kopolev described what he saw in the Ukraine and how he, a faithful Party member, felt:

*In the terrible spring of 1932 I saw people dying from hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant, lifeless eyes. And corpses – corpses in ragged sheepskin coats and cheap felt boots, corpses in peasant huts, in the melting snow of the Vologda, under the bridges of Kharkov... I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide. Nor did I curse those who had sent me to take away the peasant’s grain in the winter, and in the spring to persuade the barely walking skeleton-thin or sickly-swollen people to go into the fields in order to ‘fulfil the Bolshevik sowing plan in shock-worker style’. Nor did I lose my faith. As before I believed because I wanted to believe.*

That year was followed by an even more terrible spring as the Soviet writer, Vasily Grossman, recorded:

*When the snow melted true starvation began. People had swollen faces and legs and stomachs. They could not contain their urine... And now they ate anything at all. They caught mice, rats, sparrows, ants, earthworms. They ground up bones into flour, and did the same thing with leather and shoe soles; they cut up old skins and furs to make noodles of a kind and they cooked glue. And when the grass came up, they began to dig up the roots and ate the leaves and the buds, they used everything there was; dandelions, and burdocks and bluebells and willowroot, and sedums and nettles...*

Another eyewitness testified at the US Congressional investigation that ‘In the spring of 1933 the fertile Ukrainian soil was covered with human corpses. Corpses could be seen everywhere – on the roads, in the fields, at the railway station. Sometimes I went to visit my village (for I still had family there) and I saw how special brigades gathered the corpses from the streets and houses, and carted them to common graves, or simply threw them in ravines. Even the undertakers themselves were half dead.’

In the then Ukrainian capital of Kharkov, the Italian Consul noted that there was ‘a growing commerce in human meat’ and that people in the countryside were killing and eating their own children. The authorities distributed public information posters that said ‘Eating dead children is barbarism’, and the Ukrainian chief procurator issued a decree to the effect that since no civil law against cannibalism existed, all cases must be transferred to the local branch of the secret police, the OGPU. As the famine deepened, people tried desperately to flee. Viktor Serge recalled in *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*: ‘Filthy crowds fill the stations; men, women and children in heaps, waiting for God knows what trains. They are chased out, they return without money or tickets. They board any train they can and stay on it until they are put off. They are silent and passive. Where are they going? Just in search of bread, of potatoes...’

People knew there was bread in the cities and left their babies in railway stations, hoping they would be taken to orphanages and cared for. It was a

forlorn hope. In Kharkov in 1932, the police removed 250 corpses every morning from the railway station. They also collected the living, including children, who would be put in cells and then taken in trucks or freight trains back to the countryside. There they would throw the dead and the dying into large pits or down gullies.

Peasants hoped that if they got to the cities they would be able to buy bread using gold or foreign currency at the special foreign exchange shops called *torgsin* that the government had opened. These shops stocked goods and foodstuffs otherwise unobtainable and the government used them to obtain gold and foreign exchange cheaply. Relatives living abroad were also encouraged to send money through the *torgsin* in answer to desperate appeals. Those with no relatives abroad broke open graves to borrow gold from the dead.

At the same time the authorities organized a deliberate conspiracy of silence. Doctors were forbidden to disclose on death certificates that the deceased had starved to death, as one eyewitness reported to the US Congressional investigation: ‘The Soviet government told officials on the *oblast* [region] and *raion* [district] levels that they must never write on a death certificate that someone had died of starvation. Since the authorities had to account for every single death, even the people who died on the roads and streets, they would make up all sorts of illnesses – intestinal disorders, heart attacks – as causes of death.’

At the height of the famine in 1933, the Party even invited the former French prime minister Edouard Herriot to make a state visit to Kiev. Before he arrived, mounted police dispersed people queuing for food, killing some. Other influential figures added their weight to Moscow’s vehement denials that a famine was taking place. The Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times*, Walter Duranty, the American journalist Anna Louise Strong (who would later deny the Chinese famine) and the British social reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb were among those who joined organized visits to collective farms and then poured scorn on those who said there was mass starvation. The few who did go and report the truth, like the *Guardian*’s Moscow correspondent Malcolm Muggeridge, were ignored.

The Ukrainian famine finally ended in 1934 after Stalin ordered a stop to the forced seizure of grain. Within three years, he was to launch the Great Terror, purging the old Party apparatus, executing his colleagues after show trials and sending huge numbers of other Party members, military officers and intellectuals to labour camps. One of those who made a direct link between the famine and the purges was the writer Boris Pasternak. In *Dr Zhivago* he wrote: ‘Collectivization was an erroneous and unsuccessful measure and it was impossible to admit the error. To conceal the failure, people had to be cured, by every means of terrorism, of the habit of thinking and judging for themselves, and forced to see what didn’t exist, to assert the very opposite of what their eyes told them.’

The existence of the famine and the extent of the man-made disaster remained a closely guarded secret until after Stalin’s death in 1953, a silence only partly broken in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev in his speech denouncing Stalin’s crimes, and in his memoirs *Khrushchev Remembers*, published long after he had lost power. After 1956 a few writers in the Soviet Union such as Pasternak were permitted to allude to it in novels, but it was only in the late 1980s that detailed accounts were published. Until the Gorbachev era, the official Soviet line remained that the Soviet state was blameless but that local officials had committed crimes by exceeding their authority.

In *Harvest of Sorrow*, the historian Robert Conquest estimated that between 1930 and 1937, 11 million peasants died in the Soviet Union and a further 3.5 million died in labour camps. In the Ukraine he believed that out of a farm population of between 20 and 25 million about 5 million perished in the famine. More recently, fresh statistics have come to light with the release of the 1937 census. One expert, Michael Ellman, has recalculated the death toll from the famine and has concluded that perhaps 7.2 to 8.1 million died of starvation in 1933; and the investigation by the US Congress in 1988 judged that Stalin knew that people were starving to death and that he and those around him were guilty of genocide against the Ukrainian nation.<sup>2</sup>

In 1946, when Khrushchev became First Secretary of the Ukraine, the area was again experiencing famine and he later recounted that at the time people were suffering from oedema and had once more resorted to cannibalism. Soviet agriculture and the collectives were never a success. Not once during the 1930s did per capita grain yields regain the levels seen before 1914, and after the Second World War food supplies never matched those available in Western countries, despite the fact that the Soviet Union imported grain. Most of the food that was grown came from private plots. After 1934, Stalin had staged a retreat from his policy by allowing each household a small plot of land on which to grow vegetables and raise a cow, a pig and up to ten sheep. For the next fifty years, these private plots would provide most of the food consumed in the Soviet Union.

How much of all this the Chinese Communists knew in 1949 when they established the People’s Republic of China it is hard to say. Many of them had studied and worked in the Soviet Union during the previous three decades and could scarcely have avoided hearing something of the famine or have failed to notice the food shortages. Even if they had not done so, they would have known what had happened once Khrushchev and Soviet writers began to expose the terrible deeds of Stalin, and some must have counselled against rashly copying Stalin’s policies. Yet, astonishingly, Mao proceeded to do just this, though not without considerable opposition from within the Chinese Communist Party.

## *The First Collectivization, 1949-1958*

‘The people are hungry. It is because those above devour too much in taxes.’ Lao Tzu

After the People’s Republic of China was formally proclaimed in October 1949, Mao Zedong wanted to press ahead as quickly as possible with the creation of collectives. Some of his colleagues advocated a gradualist approach, however, and a major debate opened up within the Party as to how, and at what pace, the peasants should be collectivized. Many felt China had other priorities – to heal the wounds inflicted by civil war, to establish a new civilian administration and to end the food shortages still plaguing some provinces. Officials in the countryside already had their hands full supervising land reform and persecuting landlords. On the periphery of China, the Party was still establishing its control over Tibet, Xinjiang, Manchuria and Hainan Island. Furthermore, China’s leaders were still preoccupied with the threat posed by the Nationalists, who had retreated to Taiwan, and before long were committed to a war in Korea where a million troops fought the American-led United Nations forces.

The issue of collectivization divided the Party into two groups. The moderates argued that collectivization should be a distant goal and that it should be preceded by industrialization to provide the tractors and other machinery needed to modernize China’s backward agriculture, and they quoted Lenin in support of their view: ‘If we had 100,000 tractors... then the peasants would say: we are for Communism.’ At the time not only did China lack a single plant to produce tractors but hardly anyone had seen one. Some estimated that, given China’s size, 1.5 million tractors would be needed to mechanize farming; and to make effective use of such tractors, the tiny peasant plots would first have to be amalgamated into large fields.<sup>1</sup> China’s first tractor factory only went into operation in 1958. In addition to tractors, mechanics, spare parts and deliveries of fuel would all be needed, involving innumerable logistical problems. Unless the peasants could plainly see the advantages of this modern technology, it would be hard to persuade them to give up their land. The moderates talked in terms of fifteen to twenty years to achieve their aim.

Ranged on the other side were those who believed that the only way to finance industrialization was to squeeze the peasants. Stalin had done this, and Soviet economists had pointed out that when Japan had industrialized, 60 per cent of the necessary capital had been raised by taxing the peasants. To squeeze the peasants, the agricultural economy had to be brought under government control which meant establishing a monopoly over grain purchase and distribution. This would allow the state to buy grain cheaply and sell it dear, and with these funds China could make the steel and build the tractors that she wanted. It also soon became apparent that China’s ‘big brother’, the Soviet Union, was not willing or able to provide loans, grants or gifts of tractors in any quantity. Perhaps, too, Mao hoped to catch up with the Soviet Union and to emulate what Stalin was doing. For Khrushchev, then in charge of agriculture, was implementing Stalin’s plans to create still larger collectives – giant farms, as big as provinces, that were organized around agro-cities.

It was clear, though, that establishing a state monopoly of food and depressing prices would provoke considerable opposition from the peasants and cause grain production to fall. Inevitably, the more productive peasants with the most to lose would put up the toughest resistance. These could only be brought under Party control if they were amalgamated into collectives. This was, in any case, considered a desirable objective since by sharing tools and draft animals the weaker farmers would be helped.

Those Party leaders who had studied in Russia during the period of War Communism were aware of the catastrophic famine which Lenin had created by hastily establishing a state grain monopoly. They did not want China to follow the Soviet Union’s path and see civil war renewed by large-scale peasant resistance to grain seizures. In China this would be an even greater folly since the Chinese Communist Party owed its victory over the Nationalists to peasant support.

One of the moderates was Liu Shaoqi, who had joined the Party in 1921, and had been a member of the first group of Chinese to go to Moscow and study at the Sun Yat-sen University of the Working Chinese. There he may have witnessed the horrors of War Communism at first hand. On his return to China he began to play a major role in the Party and by 1949 was a member of the Politburo’s Standing Committee. In 1959 he would become President of China and Mao’s second-in-command but he would end his life as the chief victim of the Cultural Revolution. Although he was no liberal, materials published during the Cultural Revolution claim that already in 1950 he was arguing in favour of protecting the property of rich peasants and against requisitioning surplus land: ‘This is a long-term policy... Only when conditions are mature for the extensive application of mechanised farming, for the organisation of collective farming and for the socialist reform of the rural areas, will the need for a rich peasant economy cease, and this will take a long time to achieve.’<sup>2</sup> Mao, however, stated that ‘co-operatives must come first and only then can we use large machines’. A year later Liu went further and attacked Mao’s plans to set up large collectives overnight as ‘false, dangerous and Utopian agrarian socialism’. In a lecture to the Marx-Lenin Institute of Higher Cadres, he said that the peasants’ desire to own their land ‘cannot be checked... hiring labour and individual farming should be unrestricted... no collectivization before mechanization... production and financial reconstruction are top priorities’.<sup>3</sup> He was backed by other senior leaders such as the head of the North China Bureau, Bo Yibo, who said it was sheer ‘fantasy’ and ‘Utopianism’ to imagine that the peasants’ desire to own their land would be erased by fostering co-operative peasant organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Mao, however, could not be dissuaded and the moderates were defeated. The government soon began to establish a state monopoly of grain on the grounds that it was necessary in order to curb inflation and guarantee supplies. Chen Yun, who drafted the Party’s first five-year plan (1953-7), opposed these arguments and proposed that instead of closing rural markets, procurement prices should be raised. But he was ignored, the grain markets were closed, state procurement prices were kept low and state purchases began to account for a larger and larger share of the harvest. The peasants were now paying more in grain taxes than before 1949 but state investment in agriculture was pegged at only 7 per cent of government spending under the five-year plan. By the mid-1950s the Party was able to control the distribution of grain sufficiently to establish a grain rationing system for the cities. Cadres were dispatched to the villages to extract state procurement quotas by force and to push the peasants into signing promises to deliver still more grain. Such was the pressure exerted that local officials or peasants who failed to meet their quotas were beaten in struggle sessions. Some even committed suicide when they could no longer feed their families.<sup>5</sup>

Determined to press ahead with collectivization, in 1955 Mao impatiently castigated the doubters as behaving ‘like old women with bound feet’ and launched what has been termed the ‘little leap forward’ in which the peasants were forced to join higher or advanced co-operatives. After 1949, the peasants had been pushed into joining ‘mutual aid teams’ which grouped 5-15 households together. Then, in 1953, the pace was stepped up and they joined ‘elementary agricultural cooperatives’ of 20-40 households. In October 1955, Mao ordered that peasants must be grouped in higher or advanced co-operatives which brought together 100-300 families. These were as big as or even bigger than the average Soviet collective farm of 245 families.



Mao repeated Stalin's condemnation of the small peasant holder as 'inherently capitalistic' and some 400 million of China's peasants were dragged into joining 752,000 of these collectives.

The land had not been formally appropriated from the peasants but they were forced to pool their draft animals, tools, seed grain and harvest grain, and to work in teams under the authority of the Party secretary. The methods used were the same as in the Soviet Union – the peasants were summoned to a meeting and made to stay there for days, or weeks if necessary, until they 'voluntarily' agreed to join the collective. Mao claimed that only by abolishing the small peasant holder could China escape from its constant food shortages: 'For thousands of years a system of individual production has prevailed among the peasant masses under which a household or family makes a productive unit: this scattered individual form of production was the economic foundation of feudal rule and has plunged the peasants into perpetual poverty.'<sup>6</sup>

Mao's ambitious plans for the peasantry also extended well beyond the economic sphere and, in the early 1950s, under what were termed 'democratic reforms', the whole world of the peasant was torn apart. The Party launched an assault on every aspect of peasant life in a bid to create a new society. On the positive side, there were renewed efforts to increase literacy, raise the status of women, improve public health and sanitation, and end foot-binding, child marriage and opium addiction. Yet other changes diminished the life of the peasant.

In the first eight years after 1949, the peasant's spiritual life came to an end as the Party closed temples, shrines and monasteries. The gallery of shamans, astrologers and *fengshui* (geomancy) experts, and the priests from various organized faiths – Daoism, Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism – who provided solace and guidance were all banished, disrobed or arrested. The ceremonies, rites and rituals that gave meaning to each phase of the agricultural cycle, and which marked the peasant's life from cradle to grave, were discouraged or forbidden. In place of traditional culture and festivals, the Party organized endless political meetings and agit-prop performances. The folk culture of the peasants had included songs that people sang while they worked, or operas that they performed at market festivals.<sup>7</sup> In Jiangsu province, peasants had performed different songs for weeding, hoeing or washing and, when they laboured in the paddy fields, would listen to long epics that went on for days. Now, even their love songs and operas were banned. The markets were closed. The holding of weddings and other feasts was also discouraged in order to avoid waste and extravagance at a time of national reconstruction.

From 1956 Mao introduced to China Stalin's internal passport. The peasant could no longer travel without permission to attend fairs, or to seek work outside the village in slack seasons. News from the outside world was no longer brought by pedlars, strolling beggars, wandering musicians and mendicant priests. The emphasis on grain production in the collectives and the travel restrictions discouraged handicrafts like embroidery or woodcarving that had been a part of peasant culture. All the small-scale private enterprises of village China withered and died, leaving the peasants dependent on what the state could supply from its factories. Yet the peasants were at the very bottom of the state's distribution chain, and many goods became unobtainable. Highest priority was now given to the urban proletariat for whom a fully fledged welfare state was created.<sup>8</sup> So while, for example, the Party outlawed traditional medicine and its practitioners, it was hard for peasants to obtain modern medicines or find an approved doctor to treat their ailments. 'The Party treated popular mores and peasant norms as enemy forces,' concluded the American authors of a study of one Hebei village, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*.<sup>9</sup> Even the tombs of the peasants' revered ancestors were not left alone but were dug up, or ploughed over, because they occupied valuable farming land.

Yet despite all these changes, or indeed because of them, agricultural output plummeted and there was widespread famine. In 1956, grain yields alone fell by as much as 40 per cent. The authors of *Chinese Village, Socialist State* recorded that in one part of Hebei province: 'Some villagers recalled 1956, the first year of collectivisation, as the low point of their economic fortunes. The data is fragmentary but it seems that Wugong [village], as with many Hebei communities, suffered a catastrophe exceeded in living memory in its toll of human life only by the great famine of 1943.' Reliable figures on the scale of the disaster are hard to obtain but some interviewees reported hearing of large-scale famine deaths in the provinces of Yunnan, Gansu, Guangxi and Sichuan. In Fujian province peasants were reported to be eating the bark off the trees. In Shunyi county, not far from Beijing, one source said peasants were reduced to living off nothing but 'cakes' made of chaff and bark. Peasants in different parts of the country began to flee their homes in search of food and among the Tibetans in Sichuan and Qinghai provinces a full-scale rebellion erupted.

The collectivization of farm animals led peasants to kill them and sell their meat before the collective appropriated the animals. In Fengyang county in Anhui, records show why: the collective paid a peasant only 5.5 yuan for an ox but by selling it for meat he could earn 30 or 40 yuan. And since those animals that survived collectivization were now publicly owned, no one felt responsible for them. Peasants worked the animals to death and fed the fodder to their own pigs. In the autumn of 1956, 2,100 draught animals in Fengyang died: a further 440 died after the first big snow. Peasants sang a song which went: 'In the past when a cow died we cried because it was our own, but when a cow dies now, we are very happy because we have meat to eat.' In Hebei province, the number of draught animals fell from 4.3 million to 3.3 million in 1956.<sup>10</sup> By the following year the First Secretary of Henan, Pan Fusheng, was complaining that women were forced to yoke themselves to the plough with their wombs hanging down, such was the shortage of draught animals.

Though the Party's propaganda machinery continued to trumpet great successes in agriculture, especially in grain production, John Lossing Buck, who had surveyed and studied Chinese agriculture before 1949, later cast doubt on these claims. Now in America, he looked at the figures and concluded that the Communists had manipulated their statistics.<sup>11</sup> By using too low a figure for grain yields before 1949, they had produced a 'series of production data which record increases that are primarily statistical'. Even so, they could not disguise the fact that average grain harvests between 1949 and 1958 were below those of 1931-7 and that the peasants had been better off between 1929 and 1933 (years of great famine in northern China) when annual per capita grain production was higher.

The moderates in the Party leadership, including Zhou Enlai, wanted to retreat from collectivization. It was clear not only that Mao's 'little leap forward' had been an economic failure but also that it was causing political unrest.<sup>12</sup> They pointed to internal reports that in some places the peasants had beaten up cadres and withdrawn from the collectives, taking both grain and animals with them.<sup>13</sup> Their hand was further strengthened by Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech in which he exposed Stalin's crimes and criticized his agricultural policies. Collectivization under Stalin was no longer described as 'the greatest success'. Indeed Khrushchev believed that it had created a wasteland in the villages, the like of which had not been seen since the onslaught of the Tartar armies: 'One would go through a village and look around and have the impression that Mamai and his hordes had passed that way. Not only was there no new construction, but the old structures were not repaired.'<sup>14</sup>

Under Khrushchev's leadership, the Soviet Union retreated from Stalinism by raising procurement prices, rescinding taxes on private orchards and vegetable patches, and abolishing the system of forced deliveries from the produce grown on private plots. In China, little was said publicly about Khrushchev's secret speech, although Mao began to fear that the anti-Stalinism sweeping the Soviet Union would affect China.

In 1957 Mao responded to these different pressures by launching another political purge, the Anti-Rightist movement. Generally, this is portrayed as an attack against intellectuals who gave voice to their criticisms during a brief period of free speech which Mao orchestrated for a few weeks in 1957

under the banner of the ‘Hundred Flowers campaign’. Reviving an old phrase, ‘Let a hundred flowers and a hundred schools of thought contend’, Mao apparently set a trap for intellectuals, because those who did speak out were soon arrested as ‘rightists’. Some believe that he was taken aback by the degree of criticism and feared a Hungarian-style uprising. Whatever the case, at least half a million were seized in the Anti-Rightist campaign which Deng Xiaoping, then General Secretary of the Communist Party, organized.

However, the origins of this purge may also lie in the failure of the first round of collectivization. The targets of the Anti-Rightist campaign were not just intellectuals but also large numbers of high-and low-ranking officials who had complained about Mao’s agricultural policies. Among those who fell at the centre was Deng Zihui, the leader in charge of the Party’s rural work department, who was declared a rightist for his opposition to overnight collectivization. He was replaced by the Stalinist Chen Boda. In the provinces, numerous deputy secretaries and governors lost their posts as well. In Henan, even the First Secretary, Pan Fusheng, was toppled for saying that the co-operatives were a mess and too large to be efficient. He had decided to break up some of the collectives and had allowed the peasants to leave if they wished. For this he was accused of being a follower of Bukharin and a patron of the peasant smallholder.<sup>15</sup> Mao replaced him with Wu Zhifu, an enthusiastic supporter of the collectives, whose efforts were highlighted in Mao’s book devoted to such achievements, entitled *The High Tide of Socialism in the Countryside*. In Anhui province, the First Secretary Zeng Xisheng arrested not only large numbers of leading officials and intellectuals, including his deputy Li Shinong, but also any official who was critical of, or was even suspected of being opposed to, the collectives.<sup>16</sup> In one county alone, Fengyang, 4,362 Party cadres were investigated, 22 died under interrogation and 160 were sent to labour camps.

The Anti-Rightist campaign silenced any conceivable opposition within the Party, or from experts in the agricultural sciences, and paved the way for the Great Leap Forward. Mao began planning it in 1957. A year later he was ready to imitate Stalin with a crash industrialization campaign. Mao was no longer – if he ever had been – the first among equals but a semi-divine being who could ignore not only the advice of his colleagues but even that from his ‘big brother’ in Moscow. The Russians counselled him to avoid repeating Stalin’s mistakes, pointing out that China was much poorer than Russia had been in 1928. In China, per capita grain output was still half that of the Russians in the 1920s and so the margin for error was much smaller. Khrushchev even told Mao that those who set up the collectives in the 1920s had ‘a poor understanding of what Communism is and how it is to be built’. Yet, as he sarcastically remarked, ‘Mao thought of himself as a man brought by God to do God’s bidding. In fact, Mao probably thought God did Mao’s own bidding.’ He believed Mao wanted to show that the Chinese were capable of building socialism and to ‘impress the world – especially the socialist world – with his genius and his leadership’.<sup>17</sup>

Mao’s bid for the leadership of the Communist world inspired him not merely to match the Russians but to attempt to outdo them in reaching Communism first. His communes and his ‘agro-cities’ would be larger than those in the Soviet Union and more Communistic because they would abolish all private plots and private possessions – something not even Stalin had dared attempt. Khrushchev, who was himself far from modest when it came to devising grandiose goals and plans, announced in 1958 that in three or four years the Soviet Union would catch up with America in the per capita production of meat, milk and butter. At the same time he launched the massive ‘virgin lands’ scheme to bring 30 million acres of steppe in Kazakhstan and Siberia under the plough. Mao responded by proclaiming that China would overtake Britain; first he said this would be achieved within fifteen years, but he later shortened the time to three and then two years. Such rivalry was expressed even on relatively small issues. When the Soviets said in January 1958 that they would put their tractors in the hands of the collectives instead of machine tractor stations, a separate administration, Beijing delayed reporting this until China announced, quite independently, that she would do the same.<sup>18</sup>

In 1958, the Chinese Communists declared that the attainment of Communism and the withering away of the state ‘is no longer a remote future event’. Chinese leaders talked as if it were only three or four years away. According to his doctor, Mao boasted to his circle that ‘for decades the Soviet Union tried to establish an advanced form of social development but always they have failed. We have succeeded in less than ten years.’ In 1961, Khrushchev was to take up the challenge and announce that the Soviet Union would enter the final stage of Communism in fifteen years.<sup>19</sup>

The two countries were to fall out over many other issues, such as Moscow’s détente with the West and its unwillingness to help China build a nuclear bomb. The final split came in July 1960 when, in the space of a few weeks, the Soviets withdrew all the thousands of experts they had sent to help China after 1949, and widened still further after a series of vitriolic exchanges. Yet Mao remained an avid believer in the achievements of Stalin, including his agricultural policies and the miracles of Soviet agricultural science. He wanted China to copy and then outdo the methods used by Russian scientists such as Trofim Lysenko which had allegedly raised output to record levels. Khrushchev had at first criticized Lysenko as a fraud but later changed his mind when he launched his virgin lands scheme. Lysenko convinced Khrushchev that he had discovered a way of making the steppe lands fertile without the expense of manufacturing chemical fertilizers and herbicides. This misplaced faith in the wonders of Soviet science betrayed both Khrushchev and Mao into thinking they held the secret to creating a bonanza of food. Khrushchev’s ambitious agricultural schemes ended in disaster, the virgin lands turned to dust and Soviet meat production figures proved to be fraudulent. In 1964, Khrushchev was toppled from power, partly because of this failure. No such fate awaited Mao, although in 1958 he too was convinced that he had a formula for boosting agricultural production which would guarantee the success of his Utopian plans. There would be so much food that, as Marx had prophesied, the time would be reached when the principle of each according to his needs would be realized. There was no need to wait for gradual change because, as Hegel said, progress, like evolution, comes in sudden leaps and bounds. So Mao called his programme ‘The Great Leap Forward’.



## *False Science, False Promises*

‘Practical success in agriculture is the ultimate criterion of truth’ Stalin

‘Seeing all men behaving like drunkards, how can I alone remain sober?’ Tang dynasty poem

To launch the Great Leap Forward, Mao whipped up a fever of expectation all over China that amounted to mass hysteria. Mao the infallible, the ‘great leader’, the ‘brilliant Marxist’, the outstanding thinker and genius, promised that he would create a heaven on earth. Even in the 1940s, the Party had encouraged a personality cult around Mao but now this reached new and grotesque heights: Mao was an infallible semi-divine being. The nation’s poets, writers, journalists and scientists, and the entire Communist Party, joined him in proclaiming that Utopia was at hand. Out of China, the land of famine, he would make China, the land of abundance. The Chinese would have so much food they would not know what to do with it, and people would lead a life of leisure, working only a few hours a day. Under his gifted leadership, China would enter the final stage of Communism, ahead of every other country on earth. If the Soviets said they would reach Communism in ten or twenty years, Mao said the Chinese could get there in a year or two. In fact, he promised that within a year food production would double or treble. Even Liu Shaoqi entered into the spirit of things by coining the slogan ‘Hard work for a few years, happiness for a thousand.’<sup>1</sup>

The Great Leap Forward was preceded by a new campaign to raise Mao’s personality cult to a level rivalling that of Stalin. From the end of 1957, his portraits, large and small, began appearing everywhere. Mao was compared to the sun and people declared that the era of Mao was already like heaven on earth. The *China Youth Daily* wrote that ‘the dearest people in the world are our parents, yet they cannot be compared with Chairman Mao’. In songs, too, Mao was eulogized:

*Chairman Mao is infinitely kind,  
Ten thousand songs are not enough to praise him.  
With trees as pens, the sky as paper  
And an ocean of ink,  
Much would be left unwritten.*<sup>2</sup>

Officials toured the country in 1958 describing what happiness and bliss were at hand. Tan Chen Lin, the Minister of Agriculture, painted a fantasy of peasants jumping in one leap from mud huts to skyscrapers, travelling not on donkeys but in aeroplanes.

*After all, what does Communism mean?... First, taking good food and not merely eating one’s fill. At each meal one enjoys a meat diet, eating chicken, pork, fish or eggs... delicacies like monkey brains, swallows’ nests, white fungi are served to each according to his needs...*

*Second, clothing. Everything required is available. Clothing of various designs and styles, not a mass of black garments or a mass of blue outfits. After working hours, people will wear silk, satin and woollen suits... Foxes will multiply. When all people’s communes raise foxes, there will be overcoats lined with fox furs...*

*Third, housing. Housing is brought up to the standard of modern cities. What should be modernised? People’s communes. Central heating is provided in the north and air-conditioning in the south. All will live in high buildings. Needless to say, there are electric lights, telephones, piped water, receiving sets and TV...*

*Fourth, communications. Except for those who take part in races, all travellers and commuters will use transport. Air services are opened in all directions and every xian [county] has an airport... The time is not remote when each will have an aeroplane.*

*Fifth, higher education for everyone and education is popularised. Communism means this: food, clothing, housing, transportation, cultural entertainment, science institutes, and physical culture. The sum total of these means Communism.*<sup>3</sup>

This fantasy of American life was repeated even to peasants in faraway Tibet where people had never even seen an aeroplane or heard of a skyscraper: ‘Everyone would live in one big family... We would have no worries about food, clothing and housing as everyone would wear the same clothes, eat the same food and live in the same houses... practically everything would be done by machines. In fact a time would come when our meals would be brought by machines right up to our mouths.’<sup>4</sup>

Such fairy-tales of overnight prosperity had been spread as early as 1956. One interviewee, a former journalist from Shaanxi, recalled going to a meeting of propaganda chiefs in 1956 and hearing Mao say that after three years of hard work, China would enjoy such prosperity that no one would need to work hard, or grow much, yet all would live in great luxury.

Writers, too, were busy painting pictures of this happiness. A character in Qin Chaoyang’s *Village Sketches* described what would happen:

*Socialism means that our mountain district will be clothed with trees, that our peach blossom and pear blossom will cover the hillsides. Lumber mills will spring up in our district, and a railway too, and our trees will be sprayed by insecticide from aeroplanes, and we will have a big reservoir...*

*Can we cover more and more of the mountains in the whole district with green trees, and make the streams clearer each year? Can we make the soil more fertile and make the faces of the people in every village glow with health? Can we make this mountain district of ours advance steadily on the path to socialism? If you ask me, I tell you it can be done! We have the heart, and we have the hands! It can be done!*

Another novel, *Great Changes in a Mountain Village* by Zhou Libo, describes how the secretary of a village youth league envisages a future with all modern conveniences:

*It’ll be soon, we won’t have to wait for ten or even five years. Then we’ll use some of the co-operative’s accumulated funds to buy a lorry and when you women go to the theatre in the town, you can ride a lorry. With electric light, telephones, lorries and tractors we shall live more comfortably than they do in the city, because we have the beautiful landscape and the fresh air. There’ll be flowers all the year round and*

wild fruit, more than we can eat: chinquapins [dwarf chestnuts] and chestnuts all over the hills.<sup>5</sup>

Naturally enough, peasants all over China began to ask when they would get to Communism and were told soon, very soon. Such fantastic optimism was based on Mao's fundamental ignorance of modern science. Although he had barely ventured outside China and had never studied Western science, Mao believed that science could make his dreams come true. While in the remote hills of Yanan, Mao and his colleagues carefully studied Moscow's propaganda works eulogizing the great achievements of such Soviet scientists as Pavlov, Lysenko and others, and became convinced that they were genuine.

Marxism claims, above all, to be a 'scientific' philosophy, one which applies the principles of science to politics and society. In like manner, Mao believed, modern science could transform the lives of those millions of ignorant peasants sunk in the mire of centuries of feudal superstition. There was no time to wait for them to become convinced, they would have to be forcibly dragged into the twentieth century. Everything connected with traditional beliefs was smashed in the Great Leap Forward (although many observers tend to assume that this happened later, in the Cultural Revolution) but, ironically, what Mao put in place of these beliefs was a pseudo-science, a fantasy that could not be validated by science, or stand up to rational examination, any more than could the peasant superstitions which the Party ridiculed.

Kang Sheng, Mao's loyal henchman, exemplified this casual approach to facts: 'We should be like Marx, entitled to talk nonsense,' he told everyone, and he toured the country lecturing about the need to add imagination to science. 'What is science?' he asked teachers in Zhengzhou, Henan province, in 1958. 'Science is simply acting daringly. There is nothing mysterious about it.' In Hefei, Anhui province, he continued on the same theme: 'There is nothing special about making nuclear reactors, cyclotrons or rockets. You shouldn't be frightened by these things: as long as you act daringly you will be able to succeed very quickly... You need to have spirit to feel superior to everyone, as if there was no one beside you... You shouldn't care about any First Machine Building Ministry, Second Machine Building Ministry, or Qinghua University, but just act recklessly and it will be all right.'<sup>6</sup>

In Shanghai that year he told cadres that 'if by national day next year, Shanghai's schools are able to launch a third-grade rocket to an altitude of 300 kilometres, they should get three marks... A third-grade rocket with a satellite should get five marks. This is very easy. At New Year, the [ordinary] Shanghainese fire rockets, so surely the schools can launch [real] rockets!'<sup>7</sup>

Trained scientists such as Professor Qian Xusen, the American nuclear physicist who returned to serve Mao and help build China's nuclear bomb, gave credibility to this optimism. He wrote articles and gave lectures to agricultural experts stating that it was quite realistic to increase crop yields ten or a hundred times. Qian said that one small plot of land could yield over a dozen tonnes of grain if just a small percentage of the energy from sunlight were properly utilized.<sup>8</sup>

Such carelessness with the truth shocked even visiting Soviet scientists like Mikhail Klochko. He discovered first-year chemistry students at a teacher training school rewriting their organic chemistry textbooks as they went along. For example, the students had decided they would only learn about copper, because they lived in Yunnan province which is rich in copper ore, so there was no need to bother with the other metals and elements.<sup>9</sup> This approach to science mirrored that in Soviet Russia when Stalin launched his first five-year plan. Then, the message of countless books and articles was the same: the impossible could only be achieved by ignoring the advice of timid experts, the 'bourgeois specialists' who lived in ivory towers, pedantically inching their way forward. True scientists were peasants filled with intuitive knowledge and led by Party members driven by revolutionary fervour – that was how miracles were achieved. The Soviet novel *Izbrannoe (The Select)* by I. Babel, for example, contains a discussion in which a noted oil expert is reprimanded by a young Party member who says: 'We do not doubt the knowledge or goodwill of the professor... but we reject the fetishism of figures which hold us in thrall... We reject the multiplication table as the basis for policy.'

In the Great Leap Forward, much the same happened in China, only in real life. The *People's Daily* reported how students in one faculty of science and mathematics showed their disdain for basic theory by putting decimal points in the wrong place while others deliberately made mistakes when calculating square roots.<sup>10</sup> Still worse, the message was put out that science was so simple, even a child could excel at it. A propaganda book, *They Are Creating Miracles*, described how children at a primary school 'developed ten more new crops on its experimental plot', a feat presented as hard fact: 'It's a story out of a science-fiction book! But, no, my young friends, it is not! This is a true story. There are no fairy-tale magicians, no white-bearded wizards of never-never land. The heroes of our story are a group of Young Pioneers studying in an ordinary village primary school.'<sup>11</sup>

All over China in 1958, the Party created thousands of new colleges, universities and research institutes, while real scientists were imprisoned or sent to do manual labour. In their place, thousands of untrained peasants carried out 'scientific research'. Many kinds of miracles were announced but the Great Leap Forward was above all about creating huge increases in grain and steel production. These were the 'two generals' that Mao said would modernize China.

Just as Stalin saw a huge increase in steel production as the cornerstone of his crash industrialization programme, Mao envisaged a doubling or trebling of steel output within a year. The entire country, from peasants in remote villages on the Tibetan plateau to top Party officials in Zhongnanhai in Beijing, set up smelters in 1958 and 1959 to create 'steel' in backyard furnaces. Everyone had to meet a quota by handing over their metal possessions. People handed in bicycles, railings, iron bedsteads, door knobs, their pots and pans and cooking grates. And to fire the furnaces, huge numbers of trees were cut down. In the countryside people worked day and night fuelling these furnaces. While they did so, they could eat as much as they wanted out of the communes' collective food stores. The lumps of useless metal that emerged were supposed to be used in the mechanization of agriculture. Had China really produced a lot more steel then it could have been used to make the necessary tractors, ploughs, threshing machines, trucks, diesel engines and pumps. Instead the peasants relied on *tu fa* – literally 'earth methods' – to mechanize their work by inventing hundreds of Heath Robinson-type contraptions of pulleys, ropes and cogs, all made out of wood, not steel. Propaganda photographs showed wooden conveyor belts, wooden threshing machines, wooden automatic compost-appliers – a sort of wheelbarrow with a box on top – wooden rail tracks, wooden railcars, wooden rice-planting machines, wooden wheat harvesters, wooden jute harvesters and, in Shandong, a whole truck made of wood. They were all a great credit to the considerable ingenuity of the Chinese peasant but, in the end, perfectly worthless. Not one has survived in use. Yet, for all the waste and folly of the backyard furnace campaign, it was never more than a minor contributory factor to the starvation that was to result from the Great Leap Forward.

Rather, it was the half-baked ideas on growing more grain, Mao's second 'general', which he insisted the nation should follow, that led to a substantial decline in grain yields. Many Chinese believe his ideas were rooted in traditional Chinese peasant lore, but though this may explain their appeal to a peasant's son like Mao, in fact he merely adopted them from the Soviet Union. To understand what happened in China, therefore, one must first step back in time to the Stalin years and examine the theories of such pseudo-scientists as Lysenko, Michurin and Williams.

For twenty-five years Trofim Denisovitch Lysenko ruled over Soviet agricultural scientists as a dictator. Those who opposed him were shot or perished in labour camps, and his victims were not rehabilitated until 1986 when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power.<sup>12</sup> Until then, Lysenko's portrait hung in all scientific institutions. At the height of his personality cult, art stores sold busts and bas-reliefs of him, and cities erected statues in his honour.

When he gave a lecture, he was preceded by a brass band and people sang songs in his honour:

*Merrily play one, accordion,  
With my girlfriend let me sing  
Of the eternal glory of Academician Lysenko.*

Lysenko dismissed the developing science of genetics as an ‘expression of the senile decay and degradation of bourgeois culture’. Instead, he advocated a mumbo-jumbo of his own which muddled up Darwin’s theories on evolution and the competition in nature between different species and among members of the same species. His school rejected the ‘fascist’ theories that plants and animals have inherited characteristics which selective breeding can develop. Lysenkoists believed that, on the contrary, environmental factors determine the characteristics of plants and animals. Just as Communists thought that people could be changed by altering their surroundings, so Lysenko held that plants acquire new characteristics when their environment is changed and that these changes are transmitted to the next generation. As one observer pointed out, this was tantamount to saying that lambs would be born without tails just because you cut off their mother’s tail. Yet Lysenko asserted that he could make orange trees flourish in Siberia, or change them into apple trees, not by selective breeding but by following Stalin’s unintelligible teachings on evolution. As the Lysenkoist journal *Agrobiologiya* put it: ‘Stalin’s teachings about gradual, concealed, unnoticeable quantitative changes leading to rapid, radical qualitative changes permitted Soviet biologists to discover in plants the realisation of such qualitative transitions that one species could be transformed into another.’

Lysenko was a semi-literate peasant from Azerbaijan whom *Pravda* praised in 1927 as a ‘barefoot scientist’ after he claimed to have found a way of growing peas in winter. These peas, he said, would green the mountains of the Caucasus in winter and solve the problem of winter forage. His next, and equally bogus, achievement went under the name of ‘vernalization’ (from the Latin, *vernalis*, for spring). Most Russian wheat is sown in winter but the seeds are sometimes damaged by severe weather. The yield from spring wheat is higher so when Lysenko claimed he could turn winter wheat seeds into spring seeds, he was promising to raise yields in many parts of the Soviet Union. His method was simple: change the environment of the seeds by soaking them in very cold water and they themselves would change.

The second verse of the Lysenko song, quoted above, also commemorates another Soviet hero, Michurin:

*He walks the Michurin path  
With firm tread.  
He protects us from being duped  
By Mendelist-Morganists.*

If the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel and the American scientist Thomas Morgan are the fathers of genetics, then I. V. Michurin, an impoverished nobleman turned tree-grafter, is the true founder of Lysenkoism. He first rose to fame in the early 1920s when a Soviet leader praised his hybrid creations, including a part melon, part squash vegetable, on show at the First All Russian Agricultural Exhibition. Michurin claimed to have created hundreds of hybrid fruit trees, and because he had received only primary education, he qualified as a genuine peasant hero. The whole nation had to follow his methods, although he insisted that ‘intuition’ was as vital an element in matching his success as his theories. Michurin dismissed real scientists as ‘the caste priests of jabberology’, especially those who espoused the theories of Mendel.

Although Michurin was later conclusively shown to be a fraud, he was hailed during Stalin’s first five-year plan as an example of what could be done with the correct attitude to science. The daring, untrammelled spirit of his thinking was evoked in this call to arms published in the magazine *October*: ‘Knock out sleepiness with punches, with demands, with insistence, with daring. With daring to master and transform the earth, nature, fruit. Is it not daring to drive the grape into the tundra? Drive! Drive! Drive! Into the furrows, into the gardens, into the orchards, into the machines of jelly factories... Faster, faster, faster, comrade agronomists!’

Another hero of the Lysenko school was the son of an American engineer, Vasily Williams, who became a professor at the Moscow Agricultural Academy. Williams thought that capitalism and American-style commercial farming based on the application of chemical fertilizers were taking the world to the brink of catastrophe. This was in the early 1930s when American farmers in Oklahoma saw their fields turn to dust. Williams believed that the answer was to rotate fields as medieval peasants had done, growing grain only every third year. The rest of the time the fields would be left fallow, allowing nitrogen to accumulate in the roots of clover and other grasses which would enrich the soil. He was opposed by other experts, among them Pryanishnikov, who stressed the importance of mineral fertilizers and shallow ploughing, but Williams dubbed them ‘wreckers of socialist agriculture’. Khrushchev later explained: ‘The debate was essentially decided on the basis of capital investments. Pryanishnikov’s theory of mineral fertilizers would have required enormous capital investments in order to build fertilizer plants and new machinery. We were short of capital at that time and so Williams’ theory was more attractive. That is how Williams’ grasslands theory came to reign supreme.’<sup>13</sup>

Khrushchev was one of those who supported Williams, but he admits in his memoirs that ‘the fact of the matter is that Williams’ system didn’t work. Even after it had been consistently implemented throughout the Ukraine, there was no improvement in our agricultural production.’

Stalin also turned to the ideas of Terenty Maltsev, a pupil of Williams, who recommended ploughing furrows four or five feet deep as a way of improving the soil texture and obtaining higher yields. New ploughs to do this were designed and manufactured and Stalin gave Maltsev the Lenin prize for science.

All these ideas helped transform a rich farming nation into one beset by permanent food shortages. On the collectives, farmers could use neither chemical fertilizers nor the hybrid corn that America was using to boost yields by 30 per cent. Furthermore, their fields were left fallow most of the time, and when the crops were sown, the ‘vernalized’ wheat did not sprout; nor did Lysenko’s frost-resistant wheat and rye seeds, or the potatoes grown in summer and the sugar beet planted in the hot plains of Central Asia. They all rotted. One year, Lysenko even managed to persuade the government to send an army of peasants into the fields with tweezers to remove the anthers from the spikes of each wheat plant because he believed that his hybrids must be pollinated by hand. Under banners proclaiming ‘Greater harvests with less dung’, Soviet farmers also had to create artificial manure by mixing humus with organic mineral fertilizers in a rotating barrel. This method removed the phosphate and nitrogen, and when the muck was spread on the fields, it was useless. Ignoring Lysenko’s repeated failures, the Soviet press continued to trumpet his endless successes: cows which produced only cream, cabbages turned into swedes, barley transformed into oats, and lemon trees which blossomed in Siberia.

Lysenko’s greatest triumphs came after the Second World War when he dreamt up the ‘Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature’. To create a new and warmer climate in the vast lands of Siberia, Lysenko proposed planting millions of trees. The peasants had to plant the seeds and saplings close together because, according to Lysenko’s ‘law of the life of species’, individuals of the same species do not compete but help each other survive. Naturally all the seedlings died but not before the composer Shostakovich had written his choral symphony, *The Song of the Trees*, and Bertolt Brecht

had penned this poem:

*So let us with ever newer arts  
Change this earth's form and operation.  
Gladly measure thousand-year-old wisdom  
By new wisdom one year old.  
Dreams! Golden if!  
Let the lovely flood of grain rise higher!*

In China, Mao became greatly taken with the theories of Williams, Lysenko and Michurin. He read Williams' book on soil while still in Yanan and later frequently quoted both him and Lysenko. Mao, too, wanted the Chinese to plant seeds close together because, as he told colleagues, 'with company they grow easily, when they grow together they will be comfortable'.<sup>14</sup> Lysenko's theories meshed perfectly with Mao's obsession with class struggle. He readily believed that plants from the same 'class' would never compete against each other for light or food. While the Chinese Communists were still in Yanan, the chief Chinese Lysenkoist, Luo Tianyu, propagated the Soviet teachings: and in the 1942 rectification movement, a purge of Party members, Luo enthusiastically persecuted those who believed in genetics.<sup>15</sup>

After the Communist victory in 1949, Luo was put in charge of the new Beijing Agricultural University and Soviet-style science now reigned supreme. In the 1950s, all Soviet methods, textbooks and ideas had to be followed, while Western-trained scientists were either arrested or forced publicly to disown their 'fascist eugenics' theories. All research in genetics came to a stop. Lysenko's Soviet disciples toured China giving lectures, and Chinese peasants studied his theories at Michurin societies. China had her own Michurin, a peasant called Shi Yiqian who became a professor at the Henan Agricultural College after he grew grapes on a persimmon tree, and apples on a pear tree. In schools, children also set up a Michurin corner in their classrooms to study how to create such hybrids. Some reportedly managed not only to graft one vegetable on to another but also to cross-breed animals such as rabbits and pigs.

Soviet ideas also dominated other fields, notably that of medicine. Perhaps the most absurd notion introduced to the Chinese was the work of Olga Lepeshenskaya, who supposedly proved that living cells could be created from non-living organic material.<sup>16</sup> None of this could be challenged, as a former doctor in Beijing explained:

*We were told the Soviets had discovered and invented everything, even the aeroplane. We had to change textbooks and rename things in Lysenko's honour. So the Harving Cushing Syndrome – a disease of the adrenalin gland – became Lysenko's Syndrome to show it had been discovered by him. Since genetics did not exist, we were forbidden to talk about inherited diseases such as sickle cell anaemia, even to students. This meant that all through Mao's lifetime there was no policy to stop people in the same family marrying each other and passing down their genes. A lot of idiots were born as a result.<sup>17</sup>*

Adherence to Lysenkoism meant that when a potato virus struck large areas of China in the 1950s, nothing could be done because, as in the Soviet Union, the changes had to be attributed to environmental factors. Chinese scientists who had invested years of research into the blight were ignored, and their work was not published until 1979. Some believe that potato output in the Mao era was half what it might have been had the cause of the problem been correctly identified.

Lysenkoism reached its apogee in the Great Leap Forward when in 1958 Mao personally drew up an eight-point Lysenkoist blueprint for all Chinese agriculture. Every farmer in every commune in the country had to follow it. The eight elements of this 'constitution', as it was called, were:

1. *The popularization of new breeds and seeds*
2. *Close planting*
3. *Deep ploughing*
4. *Increased fertilization*
5. *The innovation of farm tools*
6. *Improved field management*
7. *Pest control*
8. *Increased irrigation*

## **The Popularization of New Breeds and Seeds**

All over the country in 1958 people began to announce remarkable achievements like those of China's Michurin, Shi Yiqian. In Guangzhou, children and teachers crossed a pumpkin with a papaya, and runner beans with soybeans. In Henan, they produced sunflowers crossed with artichokes. In Beijing, scientists crossed tomatoes with aubergines, corn with rice, and sorghum with rice. One of the most glorious claims was a cross between a cotton plant and a tomato – the result red cotton!<sup>18</sup>

In addition to these vegetable freaks, the New China (Xinhua) News Agency also trumpeted claims that peasants were growing super-big plants – pumpkins weighing not 13 lbs, but 132 lbs, wheat with extra-large ears, and rice of exceptional weight. The country's top national agricultural worker, Yang Guangbo, set the pace by growing paddy rice with 150 grains per ear instead of 100. Others, too, were held up for emulation, amongst them Jiang Shaofang of the Yuli Botanical Normal School in Guangxi province whose achievements were described in *China Youth News*:

*The grains of sorghum are as big as those of corn, one full spike weighing as much as one pound, and one stalk may have several ears of corn giving a yield much greater than normal corn... Jiang Shaofang now plans by crossbreeding and grafting sorghum and corn and sugar cane to produce a plant that will be all three – sorghum, corn and sugar cane. He is also preparing next year to plant a high-yield field of wet rice that will produce 600-1,000 lbs per 0.04 acre.\* The methods he plans to use will be a) to breed a very high yield of wet rice and b) to apply highly advanced agricultural techniques.*



Specimens of these miraculous plants appeared at exhibitions or on giant pictures paraded through every city. The Chinese also claimed to produce extraordinary animals. The Ministry of Agriculture boasted in 1960 how peasants at the Golden Dragon Commune near Chongqing had been the first in the world to cross a Yorkshire sow with a Holstein Friesian cow using artificial insemination. The Xinhua News Agency described how after a year the litter was still thriving: some of these curious creatures were white but others were patched like the Holstein and ‘in general they had shorter snouts and sturdier legs than ordinary pigs’.<sup>19</sup>

These fantasies were not without consequences in the real world. One interviewee, condemned as a ‘rightist’, was sent to a farm near Shanghai where he ran the pig pen. Cadres ordered him to start the pigs breeding prematurely. Normally, pigs do not breed before they are a year old and weigh at least 160 lbs. Instructions came down from above first to start breeding when the pigs weighed 66 lbs and later to start when the piglets were just four months old and weighed only 33 lbs. There was also a scheme to cross Chinese pigs, which produce small litters of two or three piglets, with much bigger Russian sows which have up to fourteen piglets in a litter. The result was indeed larger litters but all the piglets died because the sow could not produce enough milk to feed them. The interviewee said he tried but failed to save the piglets by bottlefeeding them. Attempts in Inner Mongolia and Tibet to crossbreed local sheep and goats with Ukrainian breeds were no more successful because the offspring, ill-adapted to the harsher climate, died in the first winter.

## Close Planting

Mao’s faith in high-density planting led nearly every commune in China to start an experimental field growing grain in this way. These experimental fields were begun in 1958 and in many places were retained until 1980. In some provinces, like Guangdong, close planting was initially obligatory in all fields. A density of 1.5 million seedlings per 2.5 acres is usually the norm in the south, but in 1958 peasants were ordered to plant 6-7.5 million seedlings and the next year 12-15 million per 2.5 acres. The same close planting was done throughout China with wheat, cotton, sorghum, millet and every other important crop: the results were identical – the seedlings died. Yet the press published photographs apparently showing wheat growing so densely that children could sit on top of it. A retired Xinhua photographer later told the author that the pictures were faked by putting a bench underneath the children.

Fortunately, in most places the peasants knew that close planting was dangerous nonsense and avoided carrying it out on a large scale, otherwise there would have been no food at all in China. Party officials knew this too. One interviewee recalled that before Mao visited the Xinli experimental field in the suburbs of Tianjin in 1958, the cadres brought rice plants from other fields and pushed them close together by hand. ‘They were so close together, you really could walk across them,’ the interviewee remembered. When Mao left, the cadres immediately removed and replanted the shoots. Mao’s doctor, Li Zhisui, recalls how the same thing happened in Hubei: ‘Party Secretary Wang Renzhong ordered the peasants to remove rice plants from away fields and transplant them along Mao’s route to give the impression of a wildly abundant crop... All of China was a stage, all the people performers in an extravaganza for Mao.’

## Deep Ploughing

Mao took the idea of deep ploughing to even greater extremes than had Stalin, in the belief that if it was good to plough deep, it was better to plough deeper still. In some places furrows dug by hand were ten feet deep although generally they were around three to four feet. The exhausting, backbreaking work was often done by crack teams of peasants who sweated around the clock. In 1958 Liaoning province’s Governor, Huang Oudong, ordered 5 million people with tens of thousands of animals to toil non-stop for forty-five days to deep-plough 3 million hectares of land. Where the top soil was too shallow, he instructed the peasants to transport soil from fields elsewhere. All this was intended to treble yields in Liaoning.<sup>20</sup> In Heilongjiang in the far north, where for part of the year the soil is frozen solid, peasants blasted open furrows with dynamite. In labour camps on the high plateaux and mountains of Qinghai, the inmates tried to soften the iron-hard soil by digging little holes and filling them with straw and grass which were set on fire. In the rice fields of the south, peasant women waded through the deep paddies up to their waists and many caught infections as a result. In Anhui, where the soil is thin, the deep ploughing destroyed the fertility of the fields for many years to come. In some regions, fields were excavated to a depth of thirteen feet.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in Guizhou province the trenches were so deep that peasants had to tie ropes around their waists to prevent themselves from drowning. Later, the same province claimed to have the biggest yield in the entire country, an absurd 130,000 *jin*, or 65 tonnes per 0.17 acres.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there was never any real proof that any of this was effective, but agricultural halls displayed exhibits showing how much taller wheat plants grew the deeper they were planted. In February 1959, agronomists in Anguo county reportedly dug up wheat plants to prove that deep ploughing worked: ‘Land ploughed 5 inches had roots only 13 inches long after two months’ growth. Land ploughed 5 feet had roots 5 feet long and wheat plants growing in land ploughed 8 feet deep had roots 7 feet 8 inches long.’<sup>23</sup> The deep ploughing was not practised everywhere all of the time, but in some places peasants kept it up for three years or more.

## Increased Fertilization

Lysenkoist agrobiology ruled out the use of chemical fertilizers so the Chinese government halted investment in chemical plants and, instead, instructed peasants to use a new method to replace lost nutrients. The Russians claimed that earth when mixed with manure would acquire the qualities of manure and recommended a ratio of 10 per cent manure to 90 per cent earth. So all over China millions of peasants started mixing all sorts of earth and rubbish with real manure and laboriously hauled this to their fields and spread it. To ease the transport of massive amounts of this ‘fertilizer’, peasants built carts running on wooden rails to carry it to the fields.

The most extraordinary rubbish was thrown on to the fields as fertilizer. People in Guangzhou took their household rubbish to the outskirts of the city where it was buried for several weeks before being put on the fields. Near Shanghai peasants dumped so much broken glass that they could not walk in the fields in bare feet. Others broke up the mud floors of their huts and their brick stoves and even pulled down their mud walls to use as fertilizer. Elsewhere people tried to turn ordinary soil into manure by heating and smoking it for ten days. Some tried to collect manure by dragging riverbeds for the rich mud and weeds. An article in the *People’s Daily* explained that, thanks to the Communists, China was now no longer short of fertilizer:

*Chinese scientists have said that in the past, many people only considered the mineral plant nutrients, that is the amount of nitrogen,*

*phosphorus and potassium in the fertilizer and their relative proportions. They neglected the experience of the Chinese peasants over thousands of years in using organic fertilizer whose application in massive quantities produces high yields. Agronomists proved last year that they could supply the nutrients continuously and improve the physical properties of the soil.*<sup>24</sup>

The Research Institute of Hydrobiology also claimed to have invented ‘an everlasting fertilizer’, described as a blue-green algae which assimilates nitrogen. *China Pictorial* boasted that when planted in a paddy field ‘it is the equivalent of a permanent nitrogenous fertilizer’. Peasant scientists such as He Wenyi, ‘who could neither recognize chemical symbols, nor understand laboratory reports, nor remember lists of ingredients’, were also said to have invented a method for producing fertilizer from bacteria.

## The Innovation of Farm Tools

Some of these incredible Heath Robinson inventions made of wood instead of steel have already been described. China also experienced major setbacks when she tried to mass-produce and use machinery based on impractical designs. One example was a rice planter designed to automate the delicate and back-breaking task of planting rice shoots which proved useless because it could handle only one variety at a fixed spacing. Another was a special Soviet plough designed for deep ploughing. The Chinese version, the double-share plough, cost ten times as much as a traditional plough but proved unsuitable for the terraces and paddy fields of southern China: 700,000 had to be withdrawn from use and melted down again. In addition, the Chinese began to manufacture big, heavy Soviet tractors and rejected the small walking tractors which were then helping Japanese farmers to reap record yields on their small plots. In the 1980s, these small tractors were produced in large numbers and were credited with transforming the work of Chinese peasants.

## Improved Field Management

Improved field management referred to the field rotation system advanced by Williams. A communiqué issued at a high-level meeting at Wuhan in 1958 summarized its aims: ‘We should try to reduce the area sown to various crops to about one-third the present acreage. Part of the land so saved can be left fallow or used for pasturage and the growing of grass fertilizers: the rest can be used for afforestation, reservoirs and the extensive cultivation of flowers, shrubs and trees to turn the whole land with its plains, hills and waters into a garden.’<sup>25</sup> Though most provinces were not so foolish as to remove two-thirds of their fields from production, Mao’s slogan of ‘Plant less, produce more, harvest less’ could not be completely ignored. Henan province reported cutting the area sown to grain by 14 per cent and Inner Mongolia and Qinghai by 21 per cent, while Shaanxi stated that it was allowing a third of its arable land to lie fallow.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the intensive effort put into those areas which were sown with grain sometimes had disastrous results. In provinces such as Hunan which normally grows two crops of rice, peasants were ordered to grow three. Farmers who had poor land were ordered to switch to growing crops which promised a higher yield but exhausted the soil. As a result, in northern Anhui the peasants planted maize in the summer, and in Shaanxi they had to grow corn instead of millet. Since the only crop that mattered to Mao was grain, the acreage devoted to cash crops was in some places reduced. And in Fujian, where China’s best tea is grown, tea bushes were ripped out to make way for grain.

## Pest Control

In the interests of pest control a new campaign to exterminate the ‘four evils’ – birds, rats, insects and flies – was launched in 1958. The whole country was turned out to make a noise, beating drums and pans to prevent sparrows from landing anywhere until they fell down dead with exhaustion. The war against the sparrows, as it was termed, was only called off in April 1960 and the birds were replaced on the list by bedbugs.<sup>27</sup> Without the birds to prey on them, insects multiplied, causing damage to crops. Peasants tried to kill the insects at night by setting up huge lamps in the middle of the fields so that the insects would fly around them until they dropped down dead. Everywhere people were ordered to fulfil a quota by catching and killing flies. The same had to be done with rats and field mice. Since Tibetans regarded the killing of a living animal as a grave sin, some imprisoned lamas killed themselves rather than meet their daily quotas. This campaign was also accompanied by an intensive hygiene campaign. Even at the height of the famine people’s houses were still being inspected for cleanliness.

## Increased Irrigation

At the same time, every county in China was ordered to construct a water reservoir by building a dam and water channels. A series of gigantic schemes were also conceived and the construction of those already under way, like the Sanmenxia Dam on the Yellow River, was speeded up. Almost without exception, the engineering schemes of this period neither worked nor lasted. A senior Ministry of Agriculture official speaking in the 1990s simply dismissed all the small reservoirs as ‘completely worthless’.<sup>28</sup> Most of the county dams had collapsed within two or three years and the dam on the Yellow River quickly filled up with silt, rendering it next to useless.<sup>29</sup> Even today it barely functions. A few medium-scale dams did survive, only to collapse later with terrible results. In the worst dam disaster in history, the Banqiao and Shimantan dams at Zhumadian in Henan province burst after heavy rainfall in August 1975, releasing a wall of water which killed 240,000 people.<sup>30</sup>

The labour put into the construction of these dams was stupendous. Nearly all the construction work was performed by people using the simplest tools who worked day and night in shifts, living in makeshift tents and being fed only when they worked. The peasant labourers were organized in military units and marched to work following flags, with martial music blaring from loudspeakers. On the larger projects, tens of thousands were conscripted as labourers and paid nothing.

To make room for the reservoirs, uncounted numbers of people were evicted from their villages and forcibly relocated. In 1958, when the Xin’anjiang reservoir was built in northern Zhejiang province, 300,000 people were transferred *en masse*, and from one county alone, Chun An, 137,000 people were evacuated:

*Along the road, many of the evacuated families had to eat and sleep in the open air or in rough tents. Freezing and starving, they ate*



uncooked grain to fend off hunger. People collapsed with illness on the roadside, some even died; pregnant women had to give birth during the journey. According to an old cadre who took part in the relocation work, the marching peasants resembled wartime columns of refugees.<sup>31</sup>

Inspired by the gigantic dams in the Soviet Union, such as that on the Dnieper, and schemes like the Volga-White Sea canal, the Chinese also planned ‘the greatest construction undertaking in history’. This was a project to divert surplus water from the Yangtze to the Yellow River in the north. The water would be taken through a huge interlocking system of deep canals, dams, tunnels, ravines and lakes. Work began during the Great Leap Forward and it was envisaged that it would take millions of men seven years to complete it. As it was, the Xinhua News Agency reported that throughout China the peasants had shifted more rock and earth in a single day than had the builders of the Panama Canal in a whole decade: ‘A total of 6,560 million cubic feet was excavated in the week ending December 12, 1959. This is more than 12 times the amount shifted for the building of the Panama Canal.’<sup>32</sup> The Party also planned to water the deserts of western China and plant millions of trees by melting the glaciers of the Tianshan mountains. Propaganda photographs even showed scientists dropping materials from aeroplanes to melt the ice.

In the countryside, the dams collapsed because they were made of earth not concrete, and were designed not by engineers but by untrained peasants. The Party took a peculiar pride in defying ‘book learning’. One article in *China Pictorial* eulogized Le Heyun, a water conservancy engineer of peasant origin, as a ‘bold innovator’ and ‘advanced worker’: ‘In 1959, when the construction of the county’s Huangtan reservoir was in progress, he suggested that the culvert and conduit should be built of substitutes instead of reinforced concrete as originally planned, thereby saving 7,000 yuan.’ Interviewees said concrete was rarely used and this explained why none of the dams lasted more than a year or two. Without a functioning reservoir, the canals and irrigation ditches were rendered equally useless. In later years a few were rebuilt using concrete and one in Sichuan now serves as a boating lake.

Even when the famine was over, Mao’s faith in his agricultural methods does not appear to have been shaken in the slightest by their evident failure. On the contrary, in 1964, Mao established at Dazhai in Shanxi province a working model of his eight-point ‘constitution’. Millions of visitors, both domestic and foreign, would be taken around Dazhai and told of the wonders of its amazing peasant scientists, their nitrogen-fixing bacteria, the splendid new varieties of plants, the home-made dams, and so on. Perhaps Mao’s vanity prevented him from realizing what a fool he had made of himself.

Certainly, in 1958 and 1959, Mao seemed immune to any doubts, believing he had personally witnessed proof that his methods were succeeding beyond even *his* expectations. As a peasant song put it, the grain reached to the sky and paradise was at hand. For example, in 1958 he visited Xushui, one of the model communes, a convenient train ride away from the capital in Hebei province. As he was driven up to the commune centre, his car passed piles of vegetables, turnips, cabbages and carrots laid out for half a mile along the roadside.<sup>33</sup> Officials told him that the peasants had dumped the vegetables because they had grown so much food they did not know what to do with it. At the commune headquarters, the Party secretary told him that they were eating five meals a day free of charge and the autumn grain harvest had quadrupled to half a million tonnes. Mao was reportedly so staggered by this that he pushed up his cap and asked: ‘How can you consume all this food? What are you going to do with the surplus?’

The *People’s Daily* even started a debate on how China should cope with its food surplus.<sup>34</sup> Everywhere Mao went, Party officials told him of astounding successes: fields which did not produce 330 lbs of grain – the average before the Great Leap Forward – but 49,500 lbs or even 53,000 lbs per 0.17 acres. In fact, there was no way of knowing the real size of the harvest since the State Statistical Bureau had been dismantled and its local offices replaced by ‘good news reporting stations’. Yet the propaganda machine churned out one triumphant claim after another. China had outstripped the United States in wheat and cotton production, she had beaten Japan in per unit yields of rice, and she had bettered the United States in cotton yields.

Mao was not alone in believing this nonsense. Liu Shaoqi, formerly an advocate of gradual progress, and his wife, Wang Guangmei, applied to join the Xushui model commune. Its harvest was double that of 1957, Liu asserted, and he urged the country to ‘go right ahead and realize Communism. We must not think that Communism will only be realized very slowly. So long as we work properly, it will be very soon.’

Deng Xiaoping was equally optimistic. He expected per capita grain distribution in 1958 to be 1,375 lbs on the strength of a peasant’s assurance that by using Mao’s agricultural methods he had produced 77,000 lbs per 0.17 acres on an experimental field. Deng calculated that at this rate yields in would rise to 231,000 lbs per 0.17 acres and would by 1962 stand at 2.5 tonnes. ‘We can all have as much as we want,’ he concluded.<sup>35</sup> At Ya’an, in Deng’s home province of Sichuan, people showed how much food they had to eat by leaving pots of cooked food on the roadside from which any passer-by could help himself.<sup>36</sup> Chen Boda, one of Mao’s cronies, went so far as to declare that the time had come to abolish money; from now on not only should food be free but also clothing, haircuts and everything else.

Mao felt such achievements trumped those of the Soviet Union which had in 1957 launched the first satellite in space. The breaking of such records was therefore called ‘launching a satellite’ or ‘launching a sputnik’. He also declared that China was achieving such success that she was overtaking the Soviet Union on the road to Communism. No one dared challenge these bogus claims directly and later every senior official would explain that, like Deng, they had been innocently duped by the peasants.

In the belief that China was awash with food, everyone in the autumn of 1958 was encouraged to eat as much as they wanted, and for free. In Jiangsu province the slogan was ‘Eat as much as you can and exert your utmost in production’. In Guangdong, the Party Secretary Tao Zhu urged everyone to ‘eat three meals a day’.<sup>37</sup> In Zengui village, peasants later told American anthropologists what it was like: ‘Everyone irresponsibly ate whether they were hungry or not, and in 20 days they had finished almost all the rice they had, rice which should have lasted six months.’<sup>38</sup> In Shanxi, the American William Hinton heard the same thing: ‘If there was one facet of the Great Leap Forward that everyone remembers, it was the food. “We lived well,” said Wei-de. “We ate a lot of meat. It was considered revolutionary to eat meat. If you didn’t eat meat, it wouldn’t do... People even vied with each other to see who could eat the most...”’<sup>39</sup>

What was happening in China was almost identical to what had happened in the Soviet Union during Stalin’s collectivization movement. In his semi-fictional novel *The Soil Upturned*, Sholokhov describes a similar scene: ‘They ate until they could eat no more. Young and old suffered from stomach-ache. At dinner-time, tables groaned under boiled and roasted meat. At dinner-time everyone had a greasy mouth, everyone hiccupped as if at a wake. Everyone blinked like an owl as if drunk from eating.’

In China, where there had never been enough food for all, people ate so much that by the winter of 1958-9, the granaries were bare. Some far-sighted rural Party secretaries saved their communities by planting sweet potatoes but elsewhere people trusted that they, like the city folk, would under Communism be provided for out of the state granaries. Yet Mao refused to accept that there was a shortage and, since he was convinced that the peasants were hiding their grain, he refused to open the state granaries. Even worse, over the three years from 1958 China doubled her grain exports and cut her imports of food. Exports to the Soviet Union rose by 50 per cent and China delivered grain *gratis* to her friends in North Korea, North Vietnam and Albania.<sup>40</sup> This generosity spelt death to many in China.

The Chinese are still suffering from the greatest and most far-reaching consequence of Mao’s illusions. Convinced that China had entered an era of

unprecedented abundance, Mao rejected any thought of China limiting her population growth. The country's most prominent advocate of birth control was Ma Yinchu, the Chancellor of Beijing University. In 1958, he was dismissed and condemned as a Malthusian. Only a year earlier he had warned of the consequences if no limits were set on population growth. As with so many things, Mao took an orthodox Leninist view. From early on Communists had believed that modern science was the key to a limitless expansion of food supplies. In 1913 Lenin had declared that 'we are the implacable enemy of the neo-Malthusian theory' which he described as 'reactionary' and 'cowardly'. Mao repeatedly attacked the warnings not just of experts like Professor Ma but also of foreigners such as Professor Lossing Buck and the US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who feared that China's population growth would outpace any increase in her food supply. In the early 1960s, as China was starving, Mao wrote in yet another criticism of Acheson that: 'Among all things on earth man is the most precious. Under the leadership of the Communist Party miracles can be wrought as long as there are men. We are against Acheson's counter-revolutionary theory. We believe that revolution can change everything. China's big population is a very good thing.'<sup>41</sup>

Mao even feared that there would be a labour shortage. In December 1958, following a meeting of Chinese leaders at Wuchang, a communiqué was issued claiming that 'it will be found that the amount of arable land is not too little but quite a lot and it is not a question of overpopulation but rather a shortage of manpower'. So, from the start of the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese peasants were encouraged to have as many children as possible because, as Mao liked to remind listeners, 'with every stomach comes another pair of hands'. Within a generation, China's population would double to 1.2 billion.

In the winter of 1958-9, people in China began to starve in large numbers but another two years would pass before the Party would come to grips with the terrible disaster. Within the Party leadership, however, a struggle over Mao's policies was about to begin.



## *Mao Ignores the Famine*

‘The history of the Chinese Revolution in the past decades has fully proved one truth. It is that the execution of Chairman Mao’s direct orders is sure to lead to victories and that contravention of the same is sure to lead to failures.’ Wu Zhifu, First Secretary of Henan province<sup>1</sup>

The famine could easily have been arrested after the first year of the Great Leap Forward if enough senior leaders had dared to stand up to Mao. Yet even before the first communes were established, Mao warned in the *People’s Daily* that dissent would not be tolerated. An editorial in February 1958 bluntly stated that ‘Anyone who does not make a Great Leap is a rightist conservative... Some people think that a Leap is too adventurous. It is new, it may not be perfect, but it is not an adventure. All must have “revolutionary optimism and revolutionary heroism”.’

Naturally, no one dared utter a word of caution. Mao had unveiled the Great Leap Forward at a meeting in January 1958 in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province in southern China, when he declared that the economic plans drawn up two years earlier had been too cautious. In April, the first ‘people’s commune’ was established in Chayashan in Henan province, one of China’s poorer regions. There, for the first time, private plots were entirely abolished and communal kitchens introduced for its 40,000 members. Soon the more left-leaning provinces began to follow suit, amalgamating existing collectives into communes, although the term people’s commune, or *renmin gongshe*, had yet to be adopted. This happened when Mao visited the Seven Li village collective in Xinxiang, northern Henan, in August and uttered the words: ‘This name, the People’s Commune, is good!’ The room in which he said this was turned into a museum and the phrase ‘The People’s Commune is good!’ became a rallying cry, and a slogan painted on walls all over the countryside.<sup>2</sup>

In Henan, Mao was impressed by the astonishing achievements of the new communes which Wu Zhifu, the province’s First Secretary, showed him. Mao himself does not seem to have drawn up detailed plans on how they should function and even now it is far from clear who was responsible for their design. As Mao told his doctor, Li Zhisui, before embarking on his grand tour of Henan and other rural regions: ‘There are lots of things we don’t know. How is this people’s commune organized? How does it work? How does it allocate income and verify how much people have worked? How do they implement the idea of uniting agricultural labour with military training?’

In Henan and everywhere else Mao went in the summer of 1958, he listened to reports designed to flatter him, which hailed the fantastic success in agriculture that he had wisely predicted. At the end of August when the Party leadership held its customary summer meeting by the sea in the colonial villas of Beidaihe, Mao was so confident that he issued a grand communiqué proclaiming that Communism was at hand. The great optimism continued as Mao went on to Anhui, where another favourite, Zeng Xisheng, turned out huge crowds to greet him. In the capital, Hefei, he was introduced to the wonders of the backyard furnace. By the beginning of November he was once more in Henan for another Party meeting to listen to further reports of dazzling success. Soon afterwards Party leaders gathered in Wuchang, Hubei province, where they discussed how much grain had been harvested. The weather in 1958 had been unusually good and the harvest was indeed the highest since 1949, but all pretence of dealing with genuine statistics had been abandoned. Mao was told that the national grain harvest had gone from 185 million tonnes to 430 million, even 500 million tonnes. Disregarding such claims, he settled quite arbitrarily on a lower but still high figure of 375 million tonnes. By the end of the year, Mao felt sufficiently confident of his success to relinquish his post as President of the Republic to Liu Shaoqi. Perhaps he felt he no longer needed such honours.<sup>3</sup> No one dared challenge this atmosphere of heady optimism, not even the leader most sceptical of the Great Leap Forward, Chen Yun. He stayed silent, although he had wanted to adhere to the modest goals laid out in the second five-year plan that he had helped draw up. So did Premier Zhou Enlai, Mao’s most urbane and brilliant follower, and another moderate, who had already made a grovelling self-criticism, retracting his censure of the 1956 little leap forward.

Yet in the autumn of 1958, the great harvest was not being gathered in by the peasants. Many were too busy making steel or working on reservoirs and irrigation projects. In some places they had even melted down their scythes to make steel, and the grain just rotted in the fields. More dangerously, officials began to procure grain on the basis of the inflated harvest claims. Now that the peasants had been collectivized, the grain was not kept in the peasants’ homes but in communal granaries. No village cadre who had announced a record-breaking harvest could now back down and deliver less than a record allocation to the state. Provincial leaders, too, determined to demonstrate their achievements and their loyalty, increased deliveries to the central government. And China began to cut her imports of grain and to step up exports. Beijing wanted to show that it could repay Soviet loans ahead of schedule because Mao’s policies were so successful.

During the autumn months, the peasants had been encouraged to eat as much as they wanted but, as winter progressed, the grain in the collective granaries began to run out and the food served in the communal kitchens became sparser and sparser. The peasants traditionally call this season ‘between the green and the yellow’, because around the Spring Festival, as Chinese New Year is called, the fields are bare of both ripe and newly sown crops. In many parts of the country, around the Chinese New Year of 1959, starvation set in and the weak and the elderly began to die. Many years later, the Party veteran Bo Yibo would write that 25 million were starving in the spring of 1959.<sup>4</sup>

When, after the glowing reports of a few months earlier, stories of food shortages reached Mao’s ears he refused to believe them and jumped to the conclusion that the peasants were lying and that ‘rightists’ and grasping *kulaks* were conspiring to hide grain in order to demand further supplies from the state. He was therefore delighted when a senior official in Guangdong province delivered a report in February 1959 which exactly corroborated his suspicions. As one interviewee put it, ‘It was as if he had found treasure.’ The report was by Zhao Ziyang, who after Mao’s death would order the first commune to be disbanded and as Deng Xiaoping’s prime minister would oversee the rural reforms. In 1959 he was a senior official responsible for agriculture in the southern province and in January of that year he set out on an inspection tour of Xuwen county. If the peasants were hungry, he concluded that it was only because grain was being hoarded and so he launched ‘anti-grain concealment’ drives to ferret out the grain hoarders. This, according to a biography by David Shambaugh, resulted in ‘numerous purges, suicides and criticisms of local cadres’.<sup>5</sup> In another county, Lei Nan, Zhao did the same, organizing a series of meetings which attacked brigade and production teams for ‘hiding and dividing’ 34,000 tonnes of missing grain.<sup>6</sup>

In response to such reports, Mao issued a decree ordering a nationwide campaign: ‘We must recognize that there is a severe problem because production teams are hiding and dividing grain and this is a common problem all over the country.’ During this ‘anti-hiding production and privately dividing-the-grain movement’, local officials had no choice but to turn a deaf ear to appeals for emergency grain relief. Mao himself continued to receive petitions from starving villages but discounted them. One letter from the Po Hu commune in Henan province requested an investigation into the behaviour of production team leaders who were savagely beating peasants for hoarding grain. It complained, too, that those who refused to beat the

peasants were being condemned for exhibiting a low political consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Mao responded by instructing the provincial leader, Wu Zhifu, not to be too hard on ‘those comrades who commit slight mistakes’. Interviewees have added that he consistently refused to condemn those cadres who behaved brutally and ruthlessly towards the peasants and that on one occasion he advised ‘We only need to criticize them a bit – let them make a self-criticism – that’s enough.’

In this climate of megalomania, make-believe, lies and brutality, only one major figure appears to have had the courage and honesty to say what was really happening. This was the Minister of Defence, Marshal Peng Dehuai, who toured parts of the country in the autumn of 1958 and began reporting that things were not as good as they appeared to be. In Gansu, he found orchards cut down to fuel furnaces and the harvest left to rot in the fields.<sup>8</sup> He went on to Jiangxi and Anhui and to his home village in Hunan province and sent telegrams to Beijing warning that the ‘masses are in danger of starving’. On another tour in early 1959 he even went to Mao’s home village in Hunan and found untilled fields, falsified production figures and peasants dying of starvation.

Peng Dehuai was the only senior leader who not only genuinely came from a poor peasant background but had himself experienced famine in his home village and lost several brothers to starvation. Other leaders, such as Mao or Liu Shaoqi, were the sons of rich farmers, wealthy enough to educate their children in private schools. As a boy, Peng had enlisted in a warlord army before leading a band of peasant rebels in the mountains of Hunan. When he joined the Communists, he rose to a senior position through sheer ability. After 1949 he went on to command the Chinese forces fighting in Korea and then in mid-1959, as Minister of Defence, attended the Lushan summit.

This key Party meeting in July and August at a summer mountain resort above the Yangtze River in Jiangxi province lasted for six weeks and was the best chance the opponents of the Great Leap Forward would have of stopping Mao. The crude, barely educated but forthright soldier was encouraged by some of the more sophisticated leaders to write a petition to Mao raising objections. Far from issuing a public challenge to Mao’s authority, Peng privately gave Mao a handwritten letter running to 10,000 characters.

His mood at the time is evoked in a poem composed in the style of a verse from Beijing opera which is attributed to his pen:

*The millet is scattered over the ground.  
The leaves of the sweet potato are withered.  
The young and old have gone to smelt iron.  
To harvest the grain there are children and old women.  
How shall we get through the next year?  
I shall agitate and speak out on behalf of the people.<sup>9</sup>*

At the Lushan meeting, Peng kept insisting on the most important point of all: the Party, which had won power on the back of peasants driven to revolt by hunger, must not now be responsible for a still greater famine. It was, as he later pointed out to his niece, a gross betrayal of trust: ‘I have experienced famine. I know the taste of it and it frightens me! We have fought decades of war and the people, poorly clothed and poorly fed, have spilt their blood and sweat to help us so that the Communist Party could win over the country and seize power. How can we let them suffer again, this time from hunger?’<sup>10</sup>

He was backed by a small number of other leaders: the First Secretary of Hunan province, Zhou Xiaozhou; Huang Kecheng, Chief of the General Staff; and Zhang Wentian, an alternate member of the Politburo who had studied in Moscow. According to Mao’s doctor, Li Zhisui, Zhang said they must ‘pull the Emperor off his horse even if that means losing our heads’. Another member of this group was one of Mao’s secretaries, Li Rui, who later published an account of the meeting which gives an unusually detailed picture of what happened.<sup>11</sup> Peng’s letter itself was mildly worded, not even referring to a famine. Instead, it praised the accomplishments of the Great Leap Forward, observing that there were more gains than losses, though it did warn against leftist tendencies and stressed the need to learn from mistakes. Mao, however, scented a conspiracy and decided to circulate the letter and demolish its criticisms. On 30 July, he summoned an enlarged meeting of the Politburo which he opened with a half-hearted apology:

*The collective dining halls are not our invention. They have been created by the masses... Being basically not good at construction, I know nothing about industrial targets... It is I who am to blame... Everyone has shortcomings. Even Confucius made mistakes. In regard to speed, Marx also committed many errors. He thought the revolution in Europe would take place in his lifetime. I have seen Lenin’s manuscripts, which are filled with changes. He too made mistakes... Have we failed? No, our failure has been only partial. We have paid too high a price but a gust of Communist wind has been whipped up and the country has learned a lesson.*

Mao refused to recognize that there was anything intrinsically wrong with his goal of ‘greater, better, faster and more economical results’, or that the shortcomings of the Great Leap Forward were anything but minor. They were, he said, nothing but the ‘tuition fees that must be paid to gain experience’ and amounted to temporary defects. ‘Come back in ten years and see whether we were correct.’ All this talk of food shortages was no more than wild exaggeration:

*China is not going to sink into the sea and the sky won’t tumble down simply because there are shortages of vegetables and hairpins and soap. Imbalances and market problems have made everybody tense but this tension is not justified, even though I am tense myself. No, it wouldn’t be honest to say I’m not tense. If I am tense before midnight, I take some sleeping pills and then I feel better. You ought to try sleeping pills if you feel uptight.*

Using a singularly inappropriate metaphor, he castigated low-ranking officials for impetuously rushing things: ‘There can be no room for rashness. When you eat pork, you can only consume it mouthful by mouthful, and you can’t expect to get fat in a single day. Both the Commander-in-Chief [Zhu De] and I are fat, but we didn’t get that way overnight.’

Mao expanded this line of argument by urging the others to recognize that they all shared the responsibility for any mistakes: ‘Comrades, you must also analyse your errors and you will feel better after you have broken wind and emptied your bowels.’ He even tried to persuade the Politburo that ignorance was actually an asset in this audacious endeavour: ‘An illiterate person can be a prime minister, so why can’t our commune cadres and peasants learn something about political economy? Everybody can learn. Those who cannot read may also discuss economics, and more easily than the intellectual. I myself have never read textbooks!’

The debate went from the almost comical absurdity of these remarks to a bitter and acrimonious row as Peng Dehuai’s short temper exploded. Peng accused Mao of acting despotically, like Stalin in his later years, and of sacrificing human beings on the altar of unreachable production targets. He said that troops were getting letters from home that told them of terrible food shortages and that this could cause unrest. He warned that ‘if the Chinese peasants were not as patient as they were, we would have another Hungary’. If there was an uprising, the loyalty of the troops could not be relied upon



and the Soviet Army might, as in Hungary, have to be called in to restore order.

Mao retaliated by accusing Peng of being a 'rightist' and a 'hypocrite' and of trying to 'sabotage the dictatorship of the proletariat, split the Communist Party, organize factions within the Party and spread their influence, to demoralize the vanguards of the proletariat and to build another opposition party'. The attacks culminated in a furious exchange when Peng, referring to a much earlier argument, shouted: 'In Yanan, you cursed me [literally 'fucked my mother'] for forty days. Now I have been fucking your mother for eighteen days and you are trying to call a stop – but you won't.'<sup>12</sup>

Peng had only the timid backing of a small group of supporters, and most senior leaders avoided siding with him. Zhou Enlai, who a few months earlier had expressed concern that the reports of a great harvest were being falsified and that 'the lies are being squeezed out of the lower cadres by a higher level', did nothing. According to one biographer, he sat as silent as a stone and then returned to his room to drink 'until he was stuporous'.<sup>13</sup> Liu Shaoqi did not come to Peng's rescue and neither did Chen Yun. Deng Xiaoping was fortuitously away in Beijing nursing a broken leg.

By contrast, Mao enjoyed strong backing from his supporters, amongst them Zeng Xisheng, First Secretary of Anhui; Wu Zhifu, First Secretary of Henan; Ke Qingshi, the Shanghai Party boss in charge of the Eastern China Bureau; Xu Tong, First Secretary of Shandong; and cronies such as Kang Sheng and Chen Boda. These men denied that there was a famine and urged Mao to continue with the Great Leap Forward. Mao's trump card was the loyalty of the military chiefs who were summoned to a meeting and asked one by one to stand up and say whom they supported, Mao or Peng. Mao warned that if the Party were to split into two, he would organize a new one among the peasants, and that if the army were to split, he would go into the hills and recruit another army. The generals backed Mao.

In his memoirs Dr Li Zhisui recalled: 'Mao did want to be told the truth. Even in my disillusionment I still believe that had he fully understood the truth early in the Great Leap Forward, he would have brought a halt to the disaster long before he did. But the truth had to come to him on his own terms, from a modern Hai Rui. He could not accept it when it included criticism of him, or when it came from conspiring ministers...'<sup>14</sup>

Hai Rui was the subject of a Hunan opera performed when Mao had toured the province before the Lushan conference. The opera, called *Sheng si pai*, tells the story of the upright Ming dynasty official Hai Rui who risks his life to intervene with the Emperor to stop the execution of a woman wrongly accused of murder. Hai Rui himself is nearly executed for daring to challenge the vainglorious and misdirected Emperor. The subtle message of the opera was lost on Mao, who failed to grasp the connection between his own situation and that of the Emperor misled by the flattery of lying courtiers, but he was taken with the theme and encouraged other works about Hai Rui. Though he probably realized that some of his officials were exaggerating the success of his Great Leap Forward to curry favour, yet he never doubted that it was a success.<sup>15</sup>

Before the Lushan meeting, Mao had also gone back to his home village in Hunan, Shaoshan, where he felt his kith and kin would tell him the truth. Listening to their complaints, he disarmingly suggested that they could dismantle the collective kitchens, water conservancy projects and backyard furnaces if they did not work. His remarks were not published but the news spread to other Hunan villages. For a while parts of Hunan began to abandon the Great Leap Forward. But after the Lushan summit when the province's First Secretary, Zhou Xiaozhou, was dismissed as a rightist, his successor Zhang Pinhua reinforced all these measures. In Hunan the collective kitchens lasted in all three and a half years, longer than almost anywhere else.

Mao was willing to recognize that there were defects in what he was doing but his belief that there had been huge harvests remained unshaken. Before the Lushan meeting, he had ordered provinces to step up deliveries of grain to the centre and had approved new and higher targets for state grain procurement. As he remarked at Lushan, 'Achievements are great, problems are considerable but the future is bright.'

The Lushan meeting ended in a complete victory for Mao. The Party leadership resolved to return to the policies of the Great Leap Forward with redoubled energy and voted to condemn Peng as an 'anti-Party element' and a 'right opportunist'. A month later, Peng wrote a humbling self-criticism and was put under house arrest in a village outside Beijing where he grew vegetables. In the Cultural Revolution he would be imprisoned, tortured and killed.

Within a few weeks of Lushan, a new purge of 'right opportunists' began across the country. In the *People's Daily*, Deng Xiaoping made Mao's counter-attack clear to everyone:

*Some of the rightist elements in our Party do not wish to recognize the remarkable achievements of the Great Leap Forward... They exaggerate the errors that have occurred during the course of the movement, which the masses have corrected. They use these errors as a pretext to attack the Party line. The movement of 1958 hastened our economic development. But the rightists ignored this and insisted that the movement manifested catastrophic consequences. The people's communes work well but the rightists ignored this, and attacked this movement as a step backward. They contended that only by abolishing the communes could the living standards of the population be raised. The masses, on the contrary, believe they have made great strides forward... The rightist opportunism quite obviously reflects the bourgeoisie's fear of a mass movement in our Party.*

The provincial leaders returned from Lushan to institute a campaign of terror. All over the country large numbers of low-and high-ranking officials were dismissed or arrested as 'little Peng Dehuais' if they had betrayed even the slightest doubts about the Great Leap Forward. In Anhui, for example, Zhang Kaifan, a senior official who had written to Mao about the terrible famine in Wuwei county, was named as a 'right opportunist' by Mao. In the Anhui purge anyone whose conscience had pricked them was rounded up as a 'small Zhang Kaifan'. Throughout the countryside, large numbers of peasants were put in prison where they would starve to death in the next phase of the famine. No national figures for the victims of this campaign are available but it was one of the worst in the Party's history and extinguished any hope that the next and most awful stage of the famine could be prevented.

Instead, a new hysteria about the Great Leap Forward was whipped up. Higher and yet more absurd grain targets were put forward and still greater successes announced. Sichuan declared that its sputnik fields were producing 7.5 tonnes of grain per hectare, ten times the normal grain yield. More and more effort went into farming the experimental plots, while in provinces such as Henan and Sichuan officials were ordered to reduce the area sown with grain. The Party did quietly abandon the backyard furnaces so that the peasants were freed from the burden of mounting round-the-clock steel-making, but by then there was in any case almost nothing left to melt down because the peasants had already been stripped of everything they owned. And the collective kitchens were resumed in those parts of the country which had abandoned them in the wake of Mao's remarks at Shaoshan.

In the autumn of 1959, the grain harvest dropped by at least 30 million tonnes over that of 1958 but officials reported that it was higher, much higher. (This estimate takes into account sweet potato plantings, so the fall in real grain output was in fact still sharper.) To make their lies stick, local officials began to requisition all the grain they could find. The state procurement targets were set at 40 per cent of total output, the highest level ever, and in many places the entire harvest was seized. Sometimes, officials reported a harvest so big that even after taking away everything they could find, including all livestock, vegetables and cash crops, they still continued to search from house to house. Mao had ordered officials not only to deliver the grain quotas, but also to set quotas for pigs, chickens, ducks and eggs. Party leaders went from village to village leading the search for hidden food reserves. It was a brutal and violent campaign in which many peasants were tortured and beaten to death.

In China, most peasants practise subsistence farming, so most of the grain grown is consumed at home by the peasants themselves. Only a small part is normally delivered in taxes or, under the Communists, to meet procurement quotas. Thus, when their grain was seized, the peasants knew they had nothing left to eat. Most hoped that under socialism the state would provide for them but since no grain had been forthcoming the previous winter, many feared they might be left to die. In the countryside, mere survival became a desperate struggle. By the end of much of the peasantry was starving to death but the hardest time in the entire famine came in January and February when the greatest number perished.

Throughout this period Mao continued to claim that the peasants had buried the grain deep in the ground and that they stood sentry guarding it.<sup>16</sup> To throw the search parties off the scent, he said, they ate turnips by day and after dark secretly ate rice. In fact, the peasants ate only the gruel served up by the communal kitchens which was mixed with grasses and anything else they could forage that was edible. The peasants, as they queued for food, began to resemble the inmates of concentration camps, skeletal figures dressed in rags, fighting with each other to get equal portions.

The *People's Daily* suggested at the end of 1959 that 'the peasants must practise strict economy, live with the utmost frugality and eat only two meals a day – one of which should be soft and liquid'. In other words, one meal was to consist of buns of maize or wheat, and the other, a watery soup. The Party described this as 'living in an abundant year as if it were a frugal one'. Mao himself made a small gesture by giving up eating meat. Meanwhile, the country's main grain surplus provinces – Sichuan, Henan, Anhui and Shandong – delivered the most grain to the centre and it was in these regions that the peasants starved in the greatest numbers.

At the same time a bizarre political situation existed. Most of the Party leadership clearly knew what was going on but no one dared acknowledge the famine until Mao did so. Chen Yun, who had been to the Henan countryside and had realized what was happening, decided to retire to his villa in picturesque Hangzhou. He told Mao he was suffering from ill-health and, accompanied by a nurse, took up the study of local opera. He did not return to Beijing until 1961.<sup>17</sup> Liu Shaoqi, President of China and another member of the Politburo Standing Committee, also withdrew from the scene, in this case to the semi-tropical island of Hainan where he spent much of 1960, claiming that he was studying economics.<sup>18</sup> Deng Xiaoping appears to have spent most of his time involved in the growing ideological dispute with Moscow. The final rupture between the two fraternal Parties came in July 1960 when the 15,000 or so Soviet experts at work in China suddenly left. It is quite conceivable that Beijing wanted them to leave so that they could not report to Khrushchev that the entire country was starving.

After their departure, China lapsed into an eerie isolation. Few Chinese leaders travelled abroad and few foreign guests were made welcome in China. The foreign community was reduced to a smaller number than at any other time in a century. From the beginning of 1960, the Party banned any domestic publication from leaving the country apart from the *People's Daily* and the bi-monthly magazine *Red Flag*.<sup>19</sup> The world could only guess at what was happening to a fifth of humanity. Those inside the country knew as little as those outside. All mail was controlled by the local authorities and checked to prevent news of the famine spreading. Few Chinese had telephones and domestic travel came to a standstill. The number of flights and train departures was cut by half because there was no fuel. Travel by any other means was difficult without ration tickets that were valid nationwide.

In the China presented by *Red Flag* all was well. Mao wrote in September 1959 that the great leap in agriculture was even greater than in 1958. Henan's First Secretary, Wu Zhifu, whose province was one of the epicentres of the famine, declared that rich peasants had instructed the rightists to make the collectives smaller but 'now the masses feel much more comfortable'. In the first issue of 1960, he wrote again, saying that 'although there has been a serious drought, the communes are still very prosperous and people are very happy'. A month earlier, the leader of Anhui, Zeng Xisheng, had remarked that production increases were not to be reckoned in a few percentage points but in double digits and that thanks to the Great Leap Forward natural disasters had been overcome.

In the first half of 1960, Mao and his supporters were still calling for another great leap forward, including a giant jump in steel production. Mao ordered the mobilization of 70 million people to achieve a target of 22 million tonnes of steel, a ludicrous goal since only 8 million tonnes had been produced in 1957 and 11 million tonnes claimed in 1958. He even proposed raising total output to 100 million tonnes within ten years, but this time his orders were ignored.<sup>20</sup> Mao also insisted that the peasants continue eating in the collective kitchens, describing these as the 'key battlefield of socialism'. The fog of unreality with which he surrounded himself defied any efforts to penetrate it until the end of 1960. Much of what he did or said in this year still remains a mystery. Some accounts suggest that he retreated into his study for long periods because he could not bear to admit to himself what was happening.<sup>21</sup>

Even in Beijing there was nothing to eat, while in the countryside just outside the capital peasants who had survived were too weak to plant the new crops or harvest them. In villages a few miles outside Beijing, most peasants were grotesquely swollen by oedema and were dying in sizeable numbers. Grain output plummeted. The reality must have been impossible for anyone to escape. Yet Mao refused to halt the continuing export of grain and rejected suggestions that grain be imported. An extraordinary paralysis gripped the Party. The peasants sank deeper and deeper into a pit of numbing horror as winter approached once more. They and the Party knew they would now die in even greater numbers. No one in a position of authority dared tell Mao the truth. One source claims that he only began to respond on receiving desperate pleas from members of his own family.<sup>22</sup> He Xiaogu, a cousin from his own village, reportedly sent his son together with other villagers to see Mao and tell him of the famine. They thrust a handful of grain vouchers at him, saying 'Unless you stop, we won't go back home. We ask you to take these ration tickets and see what you get to eat with them in our village.' The following chapters attempt to describe the extraordinary scale of the disaster for which Mao was responsible.



## Part Two The Great Hunger



## *An Overview of the Famine*

‘The evil deeds of evil rulers are the source of disorder.’ Mencius

The famine of 1958-61 was unique in Chinese history. For the first time, every corner of this huge country experienced hunger, from the cold wheat-growing lands of Heilongjiang in the far north to the lush semi-tropical island of Hainan in the south. It was a situation which, even during the famines of the 1920s, experts had said was impossible. They had believed that even if one part of the country suffered shortages, China was so big and varied that there would always be a surplus somewhere else. Yet this time people starved everywhere.

Dynastic records describe how other great calamities had reduced the population of China by as much as half, but these were the consequence of great convulsions such as the civil war which followed the Qin dynasty’s collapse some 2,000 years earlier, or brutal invasions, like that of Genghis Khan’s Mongols in the fourteenth century. In 1959, China was at peace, unified under one government, with a modern transport and communications system. Moreover, the Communist government was the first since the seventeenth century to be entirely in the hands of ethnic Chinese acting independently of outside forces. The Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty, who had regarded themselves as a separate race of conquerors, had been swept away. The Western powers’ influence had come to an end, and the Japanese invaders had been defeated. Even Russia, with the departure of her experts in 1960, no longer exerted any influence over the Chinese government. For the first time the Chinese Communist Party was free of the influence of the Comintern which supervised the affairs of other Communist Parties.

The famine left no one in China untouched but it did not affect the country uniformly. Many factors played a role – geography, the policies of local leaders, nationality, sex, age, political affiliation, class background, and whether one lived in the city or the countryside. Geography was important but this famine was peculiar in that its effects were not concentrated in the traditional famine belt. Indeed, some of the richest regions suffered more than others. The traditional famine belt lies between the two main river systems of China, the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, which flow from west to east. The Yellow River rises deep inland and flows through Gansu and Shaanxi provinces and on through the provinces of Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei and northern Henan across the North China plain. This is the ancient heartland of Chinese civilization but the river has been called China’s Sorrow. Its silt-laden waters bring fertility to the lands through which they flow but also disastrous floods.

Further south, the Huai River is still more notorious because for much of its length through the provinces of Henan and Anhui, it winds through flat land, prone to extensive flooding. In times of drought, the soil is baked rock hard but in good years this region, like the North China plain, produces important grain surpluses to feed the coastal cities. Yet while all the provinces along these rivers have experienced severe famines, their fate between 1958 and 1961 depended as much on the acts of their leaders as on natural conditions. Henan and Anhui fared the worst, being governed by two ultra-left-wing leaders whose fanaticism led to both terrible atrocities and an enormous death toll. Events in both provinces are described separately in the following two chapters.

China’s greatest river is the Yangtze. It rises in the Tibetan plateau, gathers in the fertile basin of Sichuan province, perhaps the most arable region in China, pours through narrow gorges and then meanders across the richest parts of central China until it reaches the sea near Shanghai. Historically, mass famines were rare in Sichuan, but in 1958-61 this great granary recorded the highest number of deaths of any province: it too was controlled by another Maoist stalwart, Li Jingquan. His enthusiasm for the Great Leap Forward ensured that food shortages hit the Sichuanese earlier than the peasants in some other provinces. On the other hand, Sichuan recovered more quickly than the northern provinces because in the south peasants can grow two or more crops a year. Events in Sichuan and the rest of south-west China are described in [Chapter 10](#).

Some of the last territory to be conquered by the Han Chinese lies south of the Yangtze and is still inhabited by large populations of minority peoples. During the Long March in the 1930s, even the Communists were astonished by the poverty of some minority peasants who could barely afford to clothe themselves. In these regions, Han Chinese tend to farm the flat valley lands. Though generally more prosperous than the indigenous peoples, in 1958-61 they had less to eat. Since they lived in the most accessible districts, the authorities were able to seize more of their food supplies and so they died in greater numbers than the minorities living in the remote hills.

In the west of China, Tibetans, Mongols, Uyghurs and other peoples are scattered over steppes, mountains and deserts. In some ways, these minorities were better off during the famine because the authorities, however ruthless, found it harder to enforce their demands; and when the grain was taken away, they could forage in the mountains, forests and grasslands. This was not the case among the deeply religious and independent Tibetans. Communist policies there provoked a major revolt, and repression combined with famine wrought a terrible disaster described in [Chapter 11](#).<sup>1</sup>

The three provinces of Manchuria – Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang – and Inner Mongolia had been settled by Han Chinese in large numbers only in recent times. The famine of 1958-61 brought another wave of settlers fleeing hunger to the south. Inner Mongolia alone absorbed an extra million refugees and Heilongjiang province saw its population increase from 14 million to 20 million between 1958 and 1964, largely because of immigration. Yet even in Manchuria people starved, despite the fact that the region normally has a surplus of food, though the famine there seems to have struck later than in Sichuan and many other provinces.

The coastal provinces and cities traditionally import grain, relying on the inland provinces for up to a third of their needs, but are prime exporters of cash crops such as tea, cotton, silk and fruit. When the customary grain imports from inland ceased, their inhabitants starved. However, in the later stages of the famine many of those living in Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong had the advantage of receiving food packages from overseas relatives, for their provinces are the ancestral homes of the majority of Chinese living abroad. One interviewee recalled how her mother travelled regularly by fishing boat from Malaysia to Guangdong carrying barrels of pork fat steeped in oil which saved her home village from starvation. Yet although these provinces are geographically similar, their experiences during the famine differed. Zhejiang had, before the launch of the Great Leap Forward, been a stronghold of private farming. In the campaign against opponents of collectivization, those who abandoned the collectives were subjected to brutal suppression. In 1958, in one county alone, Yongjia, near the city of Wenzhou, 200,000 peasants were ‘struggled’ as ‘right opportunists’ and many were killed or sent to labour camps.<sup>2</sup> Neighbouring Fujian province had to bear the burden of being the first line of defence against a possible invasion by the Kuomintang across the straits from Taiwan. Between 1959 and 1963, the province was placed under strict military control and had to feed the large numbers of troops quartered there. Many people were arrested as suspected spies after the authorities required a considerable part of the population to report on their neighbours.<sup>3</sup> In Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong, the government also took absurd measures to boost grain production. Peasants were ordered to cut down their orchards and uproot their tea bushes and instead plant grain. And to open up more land for grain, the hills in the lightly wooded interior were

set on fire as part of a crude slash-and-burn programme and then sown with grain. The first year's crop was good because ash enriches the soil, but the following year the harvest was poor. By 1960 the Fujianese were eating nothing but sweet potatoes. These regions are also noted both for breeding freshwater fish and sea fish but interviewees said that in the midst of the famine peasants and fishermen were strictly forbidden to engage in any private fishing.

Generally, those who lived in the great cities on the coast and along the main waterways, such as Wuhan on the Yangtze, suffered least for they received ration tickets. Moreover, plans to establish urban communes were never implemented and the urban population was never forbidden to cook at home. Many did die, though, especially the old and the very young, but the famine took longer to affect them, as [Chapter 15](#) explains. Even in the very worst provinces, such as Anhui, the urban population was sheltered to such an extent that often they had no knowledge of what was happening in the villages.

The most vulnerable section of China's population, around five per cent, were those whom Mao called 'enemies of the people'. Anyone who had in previous campaigns of repression been labelled a 'black element' was given the lowest priority in the allocation of food. Landlords, rich peasants, former members of the Nationalist regime, religious leaders, rightists, counter-revolutionaries and the families of such individuals died in the greatest numbers. During the Great Leap Forward, many more people were placed in these categories and often imprisoned. As [Chapter 12](#) explains, the penal system underwent a huge expansion as millions were arrested without trial. Most of the new penal colonies were established in the frozen northern wastes of Heilongjiang or in sparsely settled lands in the west, where it is hard to grow food at the best of times. Up to half the prisoners dispatched to provinces such as Qinghai or Gansu died. Indeed the inmates of the penal colonies suffered a double misfortune. The provinces where they were imprisoned were led by hard-line extremists whose policies devastated the local population and prisoners alike.

Not surprisingly, those who suffered least throughout China were Party members. They consistently had first call on the state's grain reserves, they lived in separate compounds closed off from the outside world, and they ate in separate canteens. Even in labour camps, prisoners who had been Party members received more food than their fellow inmates.<sup>4</sup> Members of the families of officials admitted in interviews that they often had little inkling of the misery outside their privileged world and what they did know came from their servants. In the countryside, the commune leaders did not eat in the collective kitchens with the peasants but in separate canteens. Many sources have testified that the food there was always adequate and often very good, with the cadres receiving not only sufficient grain but also meat of all kinds. Zhang Zhongliang, the First Secretary of Gansu, where at least a million people starved to death, travelled with his own personal cook. In Henan's Xinyang prefecture, one of the worst affected areas in the country, the Party Secretary Lu Xianwen would travel to local communes and order in advance elaborate banquets of twenty-four courses, according to Party documents. Only at the village level did the lowest officials such as production team leaders sometimes starve to death.

The death tolls during the famine will be discussed later, but broadly speaking the bulk of those who died were the ordinary Han Chinese peasants living in the new communes. By the end of 1958, virtually the entire rural population of some 500 million was under the control of this new and bizarre form of organization which formed the institutional framework of the Great Leap Forward. Mao and his cronies boasted that the communes were the gateway to heaven and Rang Sheng composed several ditties for the peasants to repeat:

*Communism is paradise.  
The People's Communes  
are the bridge to it.*

*Communism is heaven.  
The Commune is the ladder.  
If we build that ladder  
We can climb the heights.*

The peasants soon came to regard the communes as an instrument of terror. They were set up in a great rush in the summer of 1958, often within a month, sometimes within forty-eight hours. The source of their inspiration was the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx envisaged organizing the peasants into industrial armies based in 'agro-cities' which would close the gap between town and country. Around 10,000 peasants were grouped into each commune, although sometimes they contained two or three times that number. To create a commune, the local authorities merely merged the 'higher collectives' which had been set up in 1955-6. The first commune established in April 1958 at Chayashan in Henan province brought together 27 collectives, 9,300 farms and 43,000 people. As the Party put it, 'In 1958, a new social organization appeared fresh as the morning sun above the broad horizon of East Asia.'<sup>5</sup> The communes formed one of the Party's 'Three Red Banners' – the other two being the Great Leap Forward and 'the general line for socialist construction' which would propel China into Communism. They set out to achieve the abolition of all private property, the industrialization of the countryside and the complete fusion of the state bureaucracy, the Party and the peasantry into a militarized and disciplined organization. Early each morning, the peasants would march to work behind a red flag, in some cases even carrying rifles. Within the commune they were formed into production teams, which sometimes comprised the entire workforce of a small village, and these production teams were grouped within a larger unit called a brigade. Special detachments of exemplary workers were drafted as 'shock troops' who would work twenty-four hours without a break, while the rest of the commune worked two shifts. There were even militarized teams of shock women workers.

For a few months in 1958, commune leaders actually separated men and women into different living quarters. (Indeed Mao even wondered whether it would suffice for men and women to meet twice a month for the purposes of procreation.) This separation first took place at the Xushui commune in Hebei but was later extended to many parts of the country, including Henan, Hunan and Anhui, as well as to battalions dispatched to work on dams and other construction projects.<sup>6</sup> In one commune in Anhui province, men and women lived in dormitories at opposite ends of the village. The commune leaders believed that this separation was good for production and stressed that men and women, including married couples, could 'collectively' attend meetings and work in the fields.<sup>7</sup> The Communist Party's explicit aim was to destroy the family as an institution:

*The framework of the individual family, which has existed for thousands of years, has been shattered for all time... We must regard the People's Commune as our family and not pay too much attention to the formation of a separate family of our own. For years motherly love has been glorified... but it is wrong to degrade a person from a social to a biological creature... the dearest people in the world are our parents, yet they cannot be compared with Chairman Mao and the Communist Party... for it is not the family which has given us everything but the Communist Party and the great revolution... Personal love is not so important: therefore women should not claim too much of their husbands' energy.<sup>8</sup>*

To this end, the elderly were sent off to live in 'happiness homes' portrayed as retirement homes, while children were separated from their parents and placed in nurseries or boarding schools. In most communes, such plans were only briefly realized, if at all, but the cadres were almost universally

successful in destroying domestic life by banning cooking and eating at home. Collective kitchens were set up everywhere and operated for at least three years. Usually the largest house in the village was turned into the kitchen where the food was cooked in large pots. A few places had communal dining halls but, more often than not, people squatted on the ground to eat their food. Only later on in the famine were they allowed to return to their huts to eat as families.

The agro-cities never actually existed as such, but in many places ambitious plans were set in motion. In Anhui's Fengyang county, cadres decided that they would refashion the county town by straightening out its twisting lanes. 'The streets should run in straight lines with four lanes, and in the middle there should be gardens and flowers,' urged a planning conference.<sup>9</sup> The dissident journalist Liu Binyan, who was exiled as a rightist to a village in Shanxi province in the north-west, recalled even more ambitious plans:

*There was no underground water in the mountain village but orders came for a fountain to be set up on the main street. The people rarely ever had a scrap of meat but were ordered to carve out cave dwellings in the mountainsides to house a zoo containing tigers and lions. Their carefully tended terraced fields were destroyed to erect a miniature Summer Palace.<sup>10</sup>*

Many more such wonderful institutions were supposedly set up overnight. Fengyang county claimed that by the end of 1958 it had established 154 specialized red universities, 46 agricultural middle schools, 509 primary schools, 24 agricultural technical schools, 156 clubs, 44 cultural palaces and 105 theatrical troupes.<sup>11</sup> The latter helped to provide a relentless programme of revolutionary songs which continued while the peasants worked and ate. If they were working around the clock, there were performances or broadcasts all night. Even when they were supposedly at rest, the peasants were obliged to attend political meetings and rallies.

In theory, the fantastic harvests were supposed to create unprecedented leisure for the peasants. When Mao visited Hebei's Xushui commune and heard of the great autumn harvest expected, he recommended: 'Plant a little less and do half a day's work. Use the other half for culture: study science, promote culture and recreation, run a college and middle school.' Yet such was the reality that, at the end of 1958, the *People's Daily* ran an article headlined 'See that the Peasants take rest'. It pointed out that an experiment had been carried out which compared the achievements of peasants forced to work four or five days without sleep, with those of a team which stopped at midnight and had two rest periods during the day. More was achieved, it said, by those allowed to rest. So the paper recommended that the peasants should not be overworked but allowed to sleep.

At the same time, the peasants were forced to hand over virtually all their private possessions. In some places, a Utopian madness gripped the villagers. One senior leader, Bo Yibo, later described what happened in a town in Hubei province:

*The Party Secretary of Paoma town announced in October 1958 that Socialism would end on November 7th and Communism would begin on November 8th. After the meeting, everyone immediately took to the streets and began grabbing goods out of the shops. When the shelves were bare, they went to other people's homes and took their chickens and vegetables home to eat. People even stopped making a distinction as to which children belonged to whom. Only wives were safe from this sharing because the Party secretary was unsure about this. So he asked the higher-level authorities for instructions on whether people should continue to be allowed to keep their own wives.<sup>12</sup>*

Even the bodily wastes of the peasants became public property. In the communes, communal latrines replaced private ones because the excrement had to be used on the communal fields. Any individuality in clothing was discouraged and men and women dressed alike in unisex baggy cotton trousers and jackets. And, as has been described earlier, a great effort was made to eradicate every aspect of religion and folk culture. All these policies amounted to nothing less than an attempt to expunge every and any visible difference in wealth and status between individuals, as well as between villages and counties.

The administration of the peasant's life underwent a great change too. In the past the villagers themselves had controlled many aspects of their lives. Now the commune took charge not just of all matters to do with farming, but also marriages, funerals, travel and the distribution of food and other goods. The language itself was transformed: shops were renamed 'material supply offices'; instead of cash, there were 'certificates of purchase'; and money kept in banks on deposit became 'public accumulation funds'. Chen Boda had envisaged the complete abolition of money and this almost came true. The peasants had to use ration tickets for just about everything, including hot water.

Within each commune, a new unified administrative structure was set up which was responsible for every decision, no matter how trivial. The commune Party secretary ran a handful of committees which supervised agriculture, food and trade, political, legal and military affairs, science and technology. In addition, another office was responsible for drawing up a daily plan for work, education, culture, health and welfare. Under this highly centralized administration, the individual was powerless – nothing could be done without permission from the commune headquarters which often lay several days' journey away.

Through the communes, a direct line of command reached from Mao right down to the individual peasant. Such a militaristic structure of control had, perhaps, never been so absolute at any other time in China's history. Above the communes stood the county administration, the prefectural Party committee, the provincial Party and then Mao and his cronies at the centre. Each of the twenty-eight provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities was designed to be a self-sufficient and autonomous entity. This meant that the provincial Party boss acted as a kind of regent answerable only to Mao. The civilian administration, such as the national ministries responsible for education, health, agriculture and so on, no longer functioned, nor did the administration of local government. The Party was everything and no one could challenge or appeal against any decisions taken because no other authority existed.

With money virtually abolished, the communes substituted an extraordinarily elaborate system to compute the value of work done and to achieve an egalitarian distribution of wealth. In the first stage of the communes, the cadres were supposed to apply the principle of each according to his work, so each facet of work was calculated on a point system. First, each peasant was graded on a scale of 1-10, according to the individual's physical strength and health. Skill, knowledge or experience were not taken into account. Then each type of work was graded separately with different accounting systems for each crop, for the various jobs in the construction of dams and irrigation works, and for sideline work such as raising chickens or repairing tools.

At first, the contract system was employed, under which each peasant, production team or brigade agreed to carry out a fixed amount of labour in a given period to meet the production targets set by the state. Surplus output was then divided among the different levels according to another complicated formula. At the beginning, there was, therefore, an incentive to work hard since income was linked to productivity. But then, in the autumn of 1958, Mao was so bowled over by what he was shown in model communes in Anhui and Henan that he decided China was ready to move to the next stage of Communism in which each would receive according to his needs. Touring Anhui province, Mao declared: 'Since one commune can put into practice the principle of eating without pay, other communes can do likewise. Since rice can be eaten without pay, clothing can also be had without pay in the future.'



In Henan's communes not even work points were awarded. Food was distributed in communal mess halls free of charge according to individual requirements. Everything was free, from clothes to haircuts. Under this supply system, the expenses of seven of the ten 'basic necessities of life' were borne by the commune: food, clothing, housing, childbirth, education, medical treatment and marriages and funerals. No one was even paid pocket money. The communes also began to redistribute wealth between the villages, so that the richer villages had to hand over some of their tools and animals to the poorer ones as well as anything else they possessed, including cash. When the harvest was gathered in, it was delivered to the commune headquarters which then divided it up as it saw fit. In some parts of the country this redistribution of wealth took place between counties.

Inevitably, all this caused a great deal of resentment among the peasants but by the winter of 1958-9 the whole experiment was, in any case, beginning to fall apart. In many places, therefore, it is possible that the final stage was never carried out. Nevertheless, the effect of these policies on peasant attitudes to farm work was always the same. They felt there was no longer an incentive to work hard, to care for the fields or tend the animals, because the fruits of their labour would in any event be taken away. Instead, the peasants assumed that since Communism had arrived the state would provide everything they needed. In fact, this was only true as far as the local cadres were concerned – they did indeed live well on what the state provided.

The psychological impact of the system must also be viewed in the light of traditional Chinese farming practices. Despite the backward technology employed, the Chinese peasant who farmed his small plot of land was a model of efficiency. With the advent of the communes, the Communists treated farming as if it were akin to manufacturing and could be organized like an assembly line. This approach took no account of the peasant's skill in minutely tailoring his work to suit local conditions. Even in the eighteenth century, Jesuit priests working in China had been deeply impressed by the way in which most peasants constantly fine-tuned their plots of land to get the maximum out of them: 'Most farmers have a refined knowledge of weather and time, or, in other words, of the sequence of seasonal change, as it applies to their own small area.' The peasant's knowledge of farming techniques was considerable: 'They are not content to determine what sort of manure is suitable for each soil. They go on to desire what account should be taken of what has been harvested, and what is to be sown, of the weather that has gone before, and that chosen [for a particular operation].'<sup>13</sup>

Now that the peasant no longer considered the land his own, there was no need to nurture it carefully in order to provide the maximum output over an extended period of time. Instead, orders came from a distant bureaucracy which tried to extract the maximum in the shortest possible time by sowing early, or by trying to reap two crops instead of one, or by trying to grow unsuitable crops. With the full power of the Party behind the orders to apply Mao's innovations such as close planting, deep ploughing and so on, the peasants had no choice but to obey. They knew that these methods were wrong but now each had only to concern himself with collecting work points.

After the first terrible winter of famine in 1958-9, apathy set in. The Party cadres had increasingly to rely on force and terror to get the peasants to obey their orders. At the height of the famine, they wielded the power of life and death because they controlled the grain stores and could kill anyone by depriving them of food. In many places, the cadres ordered that only those who worked could eat and left the sick, the old and the young to die. In Sichuan and some other provinces, it took a mere six months for the communes to make the journey from Utopia, where each could eat his fill, to a hell where it was 'work or starve to death'.

## Henan: A Catastrophe of Lies

‘This is a holocaust and massacre committed by our enemies.’ Party report on Xinyang prefecture

What happened in the quiet rural province of Henan in central China between 1958 and 1961 is so extraordinary that even beside the other horrors of the twentieth century, it stands out. After Mao’s death, the Communist Party allowed the publication of heavily disguised versions of the events in Henan, such works being briefly encouraged to discredit the Maoists resisting Deng Xiaoping’s rural reforms. A local opera by Du Xi called *Huang Huo* or *Catastrophe of Lies* appeared in 1979, and the novelist Zhang Yigong published *The Case of Criminal Li Tongzhong*, the story of a rural cadre who secretly raids a state granary to distribute food during the famine and is then caught and punished for his ‘crime’. However, after 1982 such works were quietly shelved and the full story of the ‘Xinyang incident’, as the events in Henan are euphemistically termed, has never been made known beyond the inner circles of the Communist Party. This is the first attempt to describe the horror which consumed this otherwise unremarkable rural backwater.

The prefecture of Xinyang lies in a plain watered by the Huai River. At the time it was made up of 17 counties and was home to about a fifth of Henan’s population of some 50 million. In April 1958, Xinyang shot to fame when the first commune in China was formed within the prefecture at Chayashan in Suiping county.<sup>1</sup> In response to this singular honour, the prefectural Party leadership became fanatically devoted to Mao and his dreams and, to sustain them, launched a reign of terror in which tens of thousands were beaten and tortured to death. A Communist Party report published in 1961 described the events not just as mass murder but as ‘a holocaust’.<sup>2</sup>

The great terror began in the autumn of 1959 when, in the wake of the Lushan meeting, the prefectural Party committee declared war on the peasants. Those who failed to fulfil their production quotas were condemned as ‘little Peng Dehuais’ and no mercy was shown towards them. Although the provincial Party Secretary, Wu Zhifu, had lowered the year’s grain target for the province in view of a local drought, the zealous Xinyang leadership was determined to show that nature would not be permitted to force a retreat. The leadership insisted that the harvest of 1959 would be as good as that of 1958, so county officials strove to outdo each other in reporting good results. After the summer, the First Secretary of Xinyang prefecture, Lu Xianwen, declared that despite the drought, the 1959 harvest in his region was 3.92 million tonnes, double the real figure. Grain levies, hitherto set at around 30 per cent of the harvest, now amounted in practice to nearly 90 per cent. For example, in one county within the prefecture, Guangshan, cadres reported a harvest of 239,280 tonnes when it was really only 88,392 tonnes, and fixed the grain levy at 75,500 tonnes. When they were unable to collect more than 62,500 tonnes, close to the entire harvest, the local cadres launched a brutal ‘anti-hiding campaign’.<sup>3</sup>

Lu Xianwen declared that anyone who even suggested that the 1959 harvest was lower than that of 1958 was an enemy of the people, a criminal who opposed the Three Red Banners. He went on to claim that since the villagers were hiding plenty of grain, the Party was confronted with an ideological conflict, a struggle between two different lines. As he told one meeting in the early autumn: ‘It is not that there is no food. There is plenty of grain, but 90 per cent of the people have ideological problems’.<sup>4</sup>

At a meeting of his deputies Lu Xianwen announced that a class struggle was now beginning in which all the peasants were the enemy. This struggle against the peasantry must, he said, be waged even more ruthlessly than had been that against the Japanese. When county Party secretaries returned from their meeting in Xinyang city, they passed the same message down to their subordinates. The secretary of Gu Xian county told his cadres that during this period the peasants must be considered as anti-Party and against socialism. The peasants, he said, were the enemy, and this was war.

Some low-ranking cadres, local peasants themselves, were appalled by this, but dissent was impossible. No one, however humble, was allowed to remain neutral in this struggle. In Guangshan county, First Party Secretary Ma Longshan publicly ‘struggled’ one of his deputies, Zhang Fuhong, beating him so severely that his scalp was ripped off and he died from his wounds.<sup>5</sup> In similar struggle sessions which took place all over the prefecture, no Party member could refuse to take part and all had to join in the beating and torture of those suspected of hiding grain. Even prospective Party members were warned that if they did not participate, they would be barred from membership. To enforce the terror, the Public Security Bureau began to arrest both officials and peasants accused of being ‘right opportunists’. Over 10,000 were detained, many of them subsequently dying from beatings or starvation.<sup>6</sup>

All over Xinyang, local officials also began to organize mass rallies which sometimes masqueraded as public entertainments to intimidate the peasants. On one such occasion, 10,000 people were invited to attend an opera performance, but when it was over the county Party Secretary, Lian Dezhu, went on stage and personally beat four peasants accused of hoarding grain. On other occasions, cadres demonstrated to the already starving peasants that some had indeed hidden grain by staging fake searches. In one commune, Ji Gong Shang, they secretly buried grain which they had first taken from a state granary. Then they summoned the peasants to watch an on-the-spot inspection in which the cadres duly discovered the ‘secret’ cache. All over the prefecture, cadres staged house-to-house searches, turning everything upside down to unearth the reserves which the peasantry was supposedly hiding from the state.<sup>7</sup>

At some rallies organized by the prefectural Party, every peasant attending had to hand over a quota of 5 lbs of grain. Later, when cadres were convinced that there really was no grain left, they would hold another rally at which the peasants were ordered to donate their chickens, ducks, pigs and other livestock. Finally, the peasants had to hand over their remaining possessions, everything from quilts to bronze door knockers – even, if they had nothing better, their cotton winter coats. In schools, teachers and pupils also had to take part in the campaign and deliver whatever grain or food coupons they possessed. Cadres in some places had to report three times a day on their achievements in the anti-hiding-grain production campaign. The prefectural Party committees even organized a competition to see which county could obtain the most grain. Huang Chuan county urged its inhabitants to eat less for three days so that it could rise higher than ninth place, its leaders declaring that it was better to let a few hundred people starve to death than sacrifice their honour.

To force the peasants to hand over their last remaining reserves, the officials did not simply beat the peasants but created a nightmare of organized torture and murder.<sup>8</sup> In its unpredictable terror, this rivalled the land reform campaign of 1948.

Lu Xianwen issued orders to his cadres to crack down on what he termed ‘the three obstacles’: people who declared that there was no grain left; peasants who tried to flee; and those who called for the closure of the collective kitchens. In implementing the crackdown, each place invented its own methods of torture. In Guangshan county, local officials thought up thirty different tortures while Huang Chuan county had a list of seventy. Party documents drawn up after the arrest of the Xinyang prefecture’s leadership in 1961 give details.



Many involved tying up and beating to death the victims, whose numbers in each locality ran into the hundreds. One Public Security chief, Chen Rubin, personally beat over 200 people in the Yidian production brigade of Dingyuan commune, Luoshan county. Han Defu, Second Secretary of the Segang commune, thrashed over 300 people. Guo Shouli, head of the militia of Nayuan brigade in Liji commune, Gushi county, beat 110 militiamen, 11 of whom were left permanently disabled and 6 of whom died. The same official arrested a commune member, Wei Shaoqiao, who had left one of the dam construction sites and returned home without permission. He was beaten to death, and when his wife came to look for him, she too was tied up and beaten until she died. She was three months pregnant. Guo Shouli then wanted to cut off the ‘roots’ of the family and killed the couple’s 4-year-old child.

Others were buried alive or deliberately frozen to death: ‘At the headquarters of the reservoir construction site of Ding Yuan of Luoshan commune, peasant Liu Nanjie had all his clothes removed and was then forced to stand outside in freezing snowy weather.’<sup>9</sup> In another case at Huashudian commune in Guangshan county, thirteen orphans were kept in water outdoors until they all froze to death. A common form of punishment was for cadres to drag people along by their hair. In one case in Huang Chuan county, a peasant woman was dragged for sixty feet over the ground until she died. Officials are also recorded as having tortured people by burning the hair on their heads, chins or genitals. The peasants tried to escape this form of cruelty by shaving off all their hair but then the cadres began to cut off the ears of their victims. In the Da Luying production brigade in Fan Hu commune, Xixian county, cadres hacked off the ears of seventeen people. A 20-year-old girl, Huang Xiu Lian, who was president of the commune’s Women’s Association, cut off the ears of four people, one of whom later died. Elsewhere women were humiliated by having sticks inserted into their genitals. Others were forced to sit or stand motionless for long periods, or made to run long distances.

Party records list still more grotesque methods of instilling fear and terror. The Party Secretary of Qisi commune in Gushi county, Jiang Xue Zhong, is said to have invented a method of boiling human flesh to turn it into fertilizer and was rumoured to have boiled more than a hundred children. Subsequent investigations revealed that he *had* boiled at least twenty corpses. Equally harsh punishments were meted out to those working in labour gangs on various huge reservoir and irrigation projects within the prefecture. According to figures for Gushi county, of the 60,000 workers sent to work on one dam project, 10,700 perished from exhaustion, hunger, cold or beatings.

There was almost nothing the peasants could do to save themselves in the face of this terror. When the collective canteens ran out of grain, some began slaughtering the remaining livestock. Retribution was savage after Lu Xianwen denounced this as ‘sabotage of production’ and demanded the punishment of offenders. Cadres in Xiangyang Dian commune in Pingyu county ordered the culprits to be dressed in mourning. Some had their noses pierced and wire pulled through the nostrils. They were then forced to pull a plough in the field like an ox. Others were stripped naked and beaten, and an oxhide still covered in fresh blood was tied around them. When the hide dried, it was torn off, ripping the victim’s skin with it. An 18-year-old student, Wang Guoxi, was similarly treated when he was accused of stealing a sheep belonging to the Party Secretary of the Zhaoluo production brigade in Fan Hu commune, Xixian county. Strung up in the sheepskin, he was dragged from village to village for three days without food. When it was pulled off, the sheepskin, which by then had shrunk, took off much of his own skin as well and he subsequently died. An official account comments that

*Various kinds of counter-revolutionary atrocities of unparalleled savagery took place in almost all counties and communes and, according to the records, they took place not only in rural areas but in cities, factories, government units, schools, shops and hospitals. Eight headmasters of Guangshan county’s 12 middle schools committed murder and it has been discovered that 28 teachers and students were beaten to death or forced to commit suicide in two middle schools.*<sup>10</sup>

Even when, at the start of winter, it was clear that the peasants had nothing to eat but tree bark, wild grass seeds and wild vegetables, Lu Xianwen declared that this was merely ‘a ruse of rich peasants’ and ordered the search for grain to be redoubled. Party cadres were also incited to smash the cooking pots in every household to prevent them from being used at home to cook grass soup.

Some tried to flee but Lu ordered the arrest of such ‘criminals’ after seeing children begging by the roadside. Militiamen were instructed to guard every road and railway and to arrest any travellers, even those staying in hostels. All government organizations were given strict orders not to provide refuge to the fleeing peasants.<sup>11</sup> In Gushi county, the militia arrested at least 15,000 people who were then sent to labour camps. In Huang Chuan county, the head of the Public Security Bureau allowed 200 to starve to death in prison and then dispatched the 4 tonnes of grain he had thereby saved to the Party authorities.

The most extraordinary aspect of these events is that throughout the famine the state granaries in the prefecture were full of grain which the peasants said was sufficient to keep everyone alive. Several sources have stated that even at the height of the famine, the Party leadership ate well. By the beginning of 1960, with nothing left to eat and no longer able to flee, the peasants began to die in huge numbers. In the early stages of the famine, most of those who died were old people or men forced to do hard labour on inadequate rations. Now, it was women and children. Whole villages starved to death. In Xixian county alone, 639 villages were left deserted and 100,000 starved to death. A similar number died in Xincui county.<sup>12</sup> Corpses littered the fields and roads as the peasants collapsed from starvation. Few of the bodies were buried. Many simply lay down at home and died.

That winter, cannibalism became widespread. Generally, the villagers ate the flesh of corpses, especially those of children. In rare cases, parents ate their own children, elder brothers ate younger brothers, elder sisters ate their younger sisters. In most cases, cannibalism was not punished by the Public Security Bureaux because it was not considered as severe a crime as destroying state property and the means of production. This latter crime often merited the death sentence. Travelling around the region over thirty years later, every peasant that I met aged over 50 said he personally knew of a case of cannibalism in his production team. One man pointed to a nearby cluster of huts and said he recalled entering a neighbour’s house to find him eating the leg of a 5-year-old child of a relative who had died of starvation. The authorities came to hear of what he had done but although he was criticized, he was never put on trial. Generally, though, cannibalism was a secret, furtive event. Women would usually go out at night and cut flesh off the bodies, which lay under a thin layer of soil, and this would then be eaten in secrecy. Sometimes, though, the authorities did intervene. In one commune, a 15-year-old girl who survived by boiling her younger brother’s corpse and eating it was caught. The Public Security Bureau charged her with ‘destroying a corpse’ and put her in prison where she subsequently starved to death. In Gushi county, in 1960, the authorities listed 200 cases of corpses being eaten and charged those arrested with the crime of ‘destroying corpses’.<sup>13</sup>

Among the peasants little blame or stigma was apparently attached to breaking such taboos. Bai Hua, one of China’s most famous contemporary writers, recalls that while living in another part of China, he heard the following story from a workmate who returned from a visit to Xinyang.<sup>14</sup> There, the man had discovered that all his relatives bar one had starved to death. This was his aunt who had managed to survive through chance because a pig had run into her hut one night. She quickly closed the door, killed it and buried it under the ground. She did not dare share the pork with anyone, not even her 5-year-old son, for she was convinced that if she did so, her son would blurt out the news to the other villagers. Then she feared that the authorities would seize the meat, beat her to death and leave her son to die anyway. So she let him starve to death. Neither Bai Hua nor his workmate condemned the aunt for her actions.

Deaths were kept secret for as long as possible. What food there was was distributed by the collective kitchen and generally one family member would be sent to collect the rations on behalf of the whole household. As long as the death of a family member was kept secret, the rest of the household could benefit from an extra ration. So the corpse would be kept in the hut. In Guangshan county, one woman with three children was caught after she had hidden the corpse of one of them behind the door and then finally, in desperation, had begun to eat it.<sup>15</sup>

The Xinyang prefectural leadership did everything it could to hide what was going on from the world outside. The Party ensured that all mail and telephone calls were monitored and censored. No one could leave the region without written permission from the Party leaders who even posted cadres at the railway station in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital. They were accompanied by guards who searched and usually arrested anyone getting off a train from Xinyang. While in other parts of China the authorities issued starving peasants with ‘begging certificates’ which allowed them to try their luck elsewhere, this was strictly forbidden in Xinyang.<sup>16</sup>

The provincial authorities in Zhengzhou did send inspection teams to Xinyang but they were prevented from gathering information. In one instance, the inspection team was simply not allowed to get off the train. Even when, in the autumn of 1959, the provincial authorities offered to send grain to relieve the shortages caused by the drought, it was refused. Some grain was delivered but it was returned by the Xinyang leadership who continued to insist that they were enjoying a bumper harvest. In the atmosphere of terror, no cadre at any level dared admit the truth: Liang Dezhen, the First Secretary of Huang Chuan county, turned back relief grain because he suspected that it was a ruse to trap him into making a political mistake, and one production brigade in the county that did take the grain sent it back as the fruits of its ‘anti-hiding-grain production’ work.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the blame for what happened in Xinyang must rest with Wu Zhifu, the head of the Henan Party organization. A short, tubby man, the son of local peasants, Wu had joined the Party early on and became a student of Mao’s at the Peasant Movement Training Institute in the mid-1920s. After the Communists had driven the Nationalists south of the Yangtze in 1948, he rose to be a senior member of the Party in Henan. As such, he was responsible for carrying out land reform in the province, which was marked by exceptional violence. Not only were landlords stripped of all their possessions, but so were rich peasants and large numbers of so-called middle peasants. According to one account, the peasants ‘carried off and divided everything that could be moved. Beatings and killings were widespread and not all victims were landlords.’<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the violence was so great that the Party was obliged to halt the process. Partly as a result, the post of First Secretary went not to Wu but to a more moderate figure called Pan Fusheng. Over the next few years, the Henan leadership was split between radical leftists loyal to Mao, who wanted to press ahead with collectivization as fast as possible, and moderates under Pan. The Maoists began to drive the peasants harder and harder, forcing them into ever larger co-operatives and pressurizing them to promise to deliver ever larger quotas of grain to the state. Such men were singled out for praise by Mao in July 1955 when he compiled his book *The High Tide of Socialism in the Chinese Countryside*. Henan suffered from famine in 1956 and Pan responded by splitting the co-operatives into smaller units and allowing peasants to leave if they wished. He criticized the collectivization, saying, ‘The peasants are the same as beasts of burden, yellow oxen are tied up in the stall and human beings are harnessed in the fields. Girls and women pull ploughs and harrows with their wombs hanging down. Co-operation is transformed into the exploitation of human strength.’<sup>19</sup> In the 1957 Anti-Rightist purge, Pan was accused of following in the footsteps of Bukharin – the Soviet leader shot for opposing Stalin’s rush into collectivization – and dismissed.<sup>20</sup> In his place Mao appointed Wu Zhifu, who turned Henan into the pace-setter for Maoist agriculture. As a result, many provinces adopted the slogan: ‘Learn from Henan, catch up with Henan, press ahead consistently and win first position.’

Chen Boda, who spent much time in Henan, made Wu his protégé and asked him to write articles about his successes in *Red Flag*, the ideological journal which Chen edited. Henan was rewarded for its loyalty by being chosen as the site for both the country’s first tractor factory and a giant hydro-electric scheme on the Yellow River.

Mao toured the new model communes in Henan several times in 1958, admiring their agricultural miracles and the speed with which some communes had apparently reached the final stage of Communism. In his wake, thousands of officials from around the country came to study the Henan model. Among the innovations launched in Chayashan was a technique called ‘launching a sputnik’. Unlike the Soviet Union’s satellite, this sputnik required no technology or science, just peasants pushed into working for twenty-four hours at a stretch to achieve extraordinary feats of industry. The American journalist Anna Louise Strong claimed that in one such twenty-four-hour sputnik, peasants produced a staggering 1.2 million tonnes of iron, more than the United States poured in a whole month. By launching sputniks, Wu promised to make Henan the first province to achieve full literacy, complete irrigation and full Communization. He also claimed that the Chayashan commune’s sputniks were lifting grain yields to astronomical levels. Yields allegedly shot from an average of around 330 lbs per 0.17 acres to 3,300 lbs and sometimes even 11,000 lbs. After Mao visited these fields, he told a top-level meeting in Zhengzhou that such yields could now be reached by everyone. It was of course all lies, for everything Mao saw was a staged pantomime. Before each visit, local officials prepared fields for Mao to inspect by digging out shoots of wheat and replanting them all in one experimental field. When Mao arrived they put three children on top of the grain to show that the wheat was growing so closely together that it could support their weight. When he left, they put the grain back in the original fields. The same trick was used to demonstrate how successfully agriculture was being mechanized. At each commune Mao visited, he was delighted to see electric irrigation pumps watering the fields, but they were always the same pumps, which had been taken from the last commune and which were then installed in the next while he slept.<sup>21</sup>

Trapped by their own lies, local officials then had to order the peasants to try to reach exceptional grain yield targets using methods such as deep ploughing and close planting. Some peasants genuinely believed that close planting would work if it was done with great accuracy. They cut up endless copies of the *People’s Daily* and on the pages spread out over the fields they marked out exactly where individual seeds should be placed. Experience dictated a limit of 12 lbs of seed per *mu* (0.17 acres), but now they tried to plant 88-132 lbs per *mu*. In some places, layer upon layer of seeds were forcibly pressed into the ground. Naturally, the seeds suffocated each other and the fields remained barren. No one dared openly admit that Mao’s ideas did not work, so they literally covered up the emperor’s nakedness with their coats. They went to their huts and took out their cotton coats and bedding, and added seeds and water. In this way the seeds quickly sprouted. When the new seedlings were high enough, the mattresses and coats were buried under soil.<sup>22</sup>

In Henan, everything was taken to extremes. When the nation was ordered to exterminate the four pests and clean up their villages and latrines, the peasants in Xinyang set a new standard in this orgy of cleanliness by brushing the teeth of their oxen and sheep. Henan’s irrigation projects were the grandest and most ambitious in China and work on them went on around the clock. In the fields, too, peasants worked at night by electric light; when that was not available, they used oil lamps and candles.

Henan’s enthusiasm for the Great Leap Forward made Zhengzhou a favourite venue for a number of key top-level meetings in 1958. That year Wu reported that the Henan grain harvest was 35 million tonnes of grain, triple the real total of 12.5 million tonnes.<sup>23</sup> To Mao this was a vindication of his policies and substantiated what he thought he had himself seen in Henan. In internal Party circulars, he described those who doubted him as ‘tide-watchers’, ‘bean-counters’ and ‘right opportunists’. After the Lushan summit, Mao was equally pleased when at a meeting in November 1959, again in

Zhengzhou, Wu Zhifu told him that Henan's agriculture was doing even better. Wu had returned from Lushan and had immediately organized a huge conference with cadres from the village level upwards. They were ordered to spare no effort to hunt down 'right opportunists'. Wu made a list of those who should be attacked. He said rightists included those who talked about the limitations of nature and predicted disaster, and divided them into five categories – among them the 'push-pull faction', the 'wait-and-see faction', the 'shaking-heads-in-front-of-the-furnace faction' and the 'stretching-out-hands faction'.<sup>24</sup> These categories were so vague and so open to interpretation that anyone could be persecuted depending on the whim of their superiors. Fear and panic swept the province.

Wu Zhifu set a new and equally unrealistic grain target of 22 million tonnes for 1959. Though lower than the 1958 target of 35 million tonnes, because parts of Henan were stricken by drought, it was more than double what was actually harvested in 1959, estimated at 10.3 million tonnes of grain.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Wu reduced the acreage sown to grain by 14 per cent in line with Williams' theories. In early 1960, he raised production targets still higher and commissioned more irrigation projects, reporting to Beijing that Henan's grain output that year was again very high and joining in the chorus of Maoist loyalists who were urging another 'Great Leap Forward'.

The blame for these acts of criminal folly cannot entirely be laid on Wu's shoulders, or on those of Xinyang's Lu Xianwen. The fanaticism with which they pursued these goals derived in part from Henan's past which had created a fertile ground for Utopian fantasies. In a region notorious for its famines, the peasants were psychologically receptive to millenarian movements. Dynasties had come and gone, but their way of life had changed little. Most lived in the same kind of crude huts made of mud and straw as had their forefathers 2,000 years before, and across the same fields the patient ox pulled a wooden plough just as its ancestors had done. By the twentieth century, Henan was a backward and impoverished region known as the 'land of beggars'. The exhausted soil could not feed the growing population and many periodically fled elsewhere. Among those who stayed, many turned to secret societies and religious sects – it is no coincidence that in the first half of the twentieth century American missionaries built hospitals and churches in great numbers in the province. Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, disaster after disaster struck Henan. In April 1938, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek breached the dykes of the Yellow River to halt the Japanese army's southward advance. Some claim that as a result between 1 and 3.9 million peasants drowned or starved and another 11 million were left homeless. Nonetheless, war continued to rack the region. In the plains the Nationalists and Japanese armies fought. In the Dabie mountains in the south of Henan, the Communist Red Army established a base and each army fought viciously for control of the peasantry. In 1943 Henan was the epicentre of what was then considered the worst famine in Chinese history when between 3 and 5 million died. This was the famine which the American journalist Theodore White witnessed and which he appealed, successfully, to Chiang Kai-shek to stop. It convinced him that the peasants were right to go over to the Communists after the Japanese defeat: 'I know how cruel the Chinese Communists can be: but no cruelty was greater than the Henan famine, and if the Communist idea promised government of any kind, then the ideas of mercy and liberty with which I had grown up were irrelevant.' In the light of what subsequently occurred in Henan under Mao, his comment has a terrible irony. The famines did not end with Japan's defeat in 1945. The following year another famine, witnessed by the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent John Ridley, carried off a further 5 million people in Henan.

Ultimately, responsibility for what happened in Henan in 1958-61 rested with Mao himself. He had personally sanctioned the orgy of violence and had held up Xinyang as a model for the rest of the country. As early as the beginning of 1959, Mao had received letters from peasants in some counties in Henan protesting that people were starving to death.<sup>26</sup> He disregarded them and in response to complaints that production team leaders were brutally beating peasants who refused to hand over their hidden grain, he addressed a meeting of provincial leaders in February 1959 as follows: 'We should protect the enthusiasm of cadres and working-class people. As for those 5 per cent of cadres who break the law, we should look at them individually, and help them to overcome their mistakes. If we exaggerate this problem it is not good.'<sup>27</sup> Officials were effectively given *carte blanche* to take any measures they wished to seize the fictitious hoards of grain.

However, reports of what was really happening in Henan were reaching the centre, and some influential figures in the capital were becoming concerned. Mao was guarded by a special unit of bodyguards, some of whom were recruited from the Xinyang region which had been an important military base for the Red Army during the 1940s, and they received letters from their relatives. Another source of information came from inspection tours by Mao's secretary Tian Jiaying and by Chen Yun, one of the most senior figures in the Party. Despite the efforts made to deceive them, both expressed scepticism about Henan's claims. Yet Mao only believed what he wanted to hear. He dismissed reports from these sources and instead accepted as the truth a report from the Xinyang leadership that insisted there was no grain crisis. It admitted that there were problems with falling grain supplies but claimed that this was only due to widespread sabotage by former landlords, counterrevolutionaries, revisionists and feudal elements. The Xinyang Party leadership (who appear to have had a direct channel of communication with Mao) proposed to solve the grain problem with a harsh crackdown. Mao was delighted to hear that, as he had always maintained, class struggle lay behind China's problems. He issued a directive to the rest of the country urging all Party members to deepen the struggle against such class enemies. The Xinyang report was copied and distributed to the whole Party as a model of what was wrong and what should be done about it. To support the Xinyang leadership, he dispatched some members from his own circle to the prefecture in January 1960. According to his doctor, Li Zhisui, Mao sent his confidential secretary, Gao Zhi, and his chief bodyguard, Feng Yaosong. He told them to come back if the assignment became too hard, saying, 'Don't worry, no one will die.'

For the entire summer of 1960 Mao did nothing, although it was by then becoming clear even to him that China was starving. The rest of the Chinese leadership was paralysed, waiting for Mao to change his mind. At the beginning of the winter, inspection teams led by senior Party leaders set out from Beijing to gather evidence of what was going on in the countryside. What happened next in Xinyang is not entirely clear. According to one version, an inspection team led by Chen Yun and Deng Liqun arrived in Xinyang but were detained as they got off the train and confined to a small room. They returned to sound the alarm. Another version has it that an army colonel from Beijing came home on leave and discovered that his relatives in Guangshan county were starving.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the famine was broken in early 1961 when about 30,000 men from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were ordered to occupy Xinyang, distribute the grain in the state granaries and arrest the prefecture's leadership. The army stayed for three or four months. One source said that in Huang Chuan county, people were so weak they could only crawl across the ground to get to the grain. Some died only feet away from it. The troops also distributed 1.17 million winter coats and 140,000 quilts, and provided emergency accommodation. A report on Xinyang revealed that in places nine out of ten dwellings had been abandoned: the troops set about repairing a total of more than half a million dwellings and opened 80,000 government buildings as shelters for the peasants. A massive effort to gather fuel for fires was undertaken and an edict was promulgated to ensure that the peasants were not asked to do more than half a day's work.

Mao had himself authorized the PLA's intervention and, in a brief letter distributed within the Party, he wrote that it was necessary to do this even if he risked being accused of rightism. The PLA, together with cadres from Zhengzhou, launched an investigation into what had happened in Xinyang. About fifty of the top officials were arrested and interrogated, and a report was drawn up and widely distributed. The official version which Mao authorized blamed the whole episode on counterrevolutionaries and class enemies:



*There are two reasons why our enemies could act so recklessly. On the one hand, they disguised themselves as the Communist Party and draped their counter-revolutionary souls with the banner of socialism and threw dust in the eyes of some people. On the other hand, there is a social basis for the counterrevolutionaries. As counter-revolutionaries were not thoroughly suppressed and land reform was not properly carried out, some landlords, rich peasants and bad men were left untouched and many of them sneaked into revolutionary organizations, collaborating with each other to carry out the restoration of the counterrevolutionary class and to conduct cannibalistic persecution of the masses.*<sup>28</sup>

Mao's views notwithstanding, the 'Xinyang incident' became widely known amongst the senior levels of the Party throughout China and was used to push for a reversal of policies in 1961. Versions of the findings of the investigation were circulated and have since reappeared in different publications that form the basis of the above account. It seems likely that one version containing higher death tolls was restricted to the top levels of the Party and that another was distributed to lower-ranking cadres to minimize the damage to morale. Evidence that morale was indeed damaged within the army comes from a document drawn up by the PLA's General Political Department, a copy of which the US State Department obtained in 1963. It expressed strong fears that the loyalty of the army was in doubt because some of the troops were openly blaming Mao for the death of their relatives.<sup>29</sup>

Different versions of the official report on the 'Xinyang incident' would explain why different sources give conflicting figures for the death toll. Some claim that the total population of Xinyang<sup>1</sup> was about 8 million in 1958 and that the final death toll was 4 million out of a provincial death toll of 7.8 million. A former Chinese Party official, Chen Yizi, who lived in Xinyang during the Cultural Revolution and, after 1979, took part in an official investigation into famine deaths, has said that the Henan provincial death toll was 8 million. When I visited the worst-hit counties, such as Luoshan and Guangshan, people readily admitted that two-thirds of the population had perished during the famine. Even in the less severely hit counties and communes, death rates of 20 or 30 per cent were standard. At the Chayashan commune, the first in China, the death rate was 33 per cent.

Other sources, including such books as Ding Shu's *Ren Huo* and Su Luozheng's *July Storm*, put the death toll in Xinyang at 1 million and the provincial total at around 2 million. Such sources provide detailed death tolls for each of the counties in Xinyang. Even if, in the absence of conclusive documentary proof, the lower figure of 1 million is accepted, this still means that around one in eight died, a figure which remains horrifying.

Few were punished for this holocaust. One version of the official report on Henan states that 130,000 cadres were investigated and ordered to reform their work-style. Of these, 8,000 were considered to have made 'serious mistakes', 983 were discharged from their posts and disciplined, and a mere 275 were arrested and brought to justice. Among them were 50 senior cadres. A handful, including the Xinyang Party secretary Lu Xianwen, were given the death sentence but were reprieved on Mao's orders.<sup>30</sup> Instead, Lu and the others were assigned to posts elsewhere in the country. Some of those responsible are still living in Zhengzhou over thirty years later. Wu Zhifu was protected by Mao and, though demoted to Second Secretary in 1962, was later given a high position in the South-West China Bureau. He reportedly wrote a self-criticism in which he said 'my crimes are very great. Whatever punishment is announced, I will not protest even if it is death.' Even today, many in Henan still consider him to have been a good man forced to do bad things. He died in the early 1970s and was praised by the Party as an honoured patriot. His mother still lives in Zhengzhou and is dignified with gifts at Qingming, the Chinese festival honouring the dead. Wu's sons have been given good jobs in the government and allowed to study abroad. Few now want to remember Xinyang's bitter history or to try to understand what happened there.

## Anhui: Let's Talk about Fengyang

‘Let’s talk about Fengyang. Once it was a good place to live, But since Emperor Zhu was born there There’s been famine nine years out of every ten. The wealthy sold their horses, The poor sold their children. I, who have no children to sell, Am roaming the world with a flower drum.’<sup>31</sup> Popular Chinese song

The first beggar to become Emperor of China buried his mother in style. She had starved to death in a little hamlet just outside Fengyang, an obscure town in the poor countryside of Anhui province. After her son Zhu Yuanzhang became emperor, he returned to Anhui and built a burial complex for his mother so gigantic that it covered a dozen square miles. Six hundred years later, the tomb is still there but its imperial grandeur has crumbled into ruins: peasants have used the bricks to build their homes, the avenue of stone spirit guardians stands deep in grass, and ducks paddle in the moat around the wooded burial mound. Emperor Zhu is one of the most memorable figures in Chinese history. After the death of his parents he became first a beggar and then a Buddhist monk. He later joined a secret visionary sect, led an army to victory over the occupying Mongols and founded the Ming dynasty, almost the only ethnically pure Chinese dynasty in the last thousand years.

Mao considered Zhu his precursor and model. Like Zhu, Mao had been a peasant, a beggar and the leader of a secret sect. He too had led an army which threw out the foreigners and had unified the nation. Mao also admired Zhu for his achievements as Emperor. To prevent the recurrence of famine Zhu had ordered the reform of agriculture, the planting of trees, the construction of irrigation works and, above all, the establishment of granaries: ‘*Shen wa dong, guan ji liang*,’ he declared – ‘Dig deep tunnels and store grain.’ Peasants were resettled in underpopulated or virgin lands, absentee landlords were dispossessed and even his troops were ordered to grow grain. Yet, as a popular song about Fengyang’s most famous son suggests, Zhu was soon hated. He became a tyrant and in his paranoia turned China into a vast police state. Each morning his officials, terrified by his sudden and bloody purges, would bid farewell to their families before leaving for the court, in case they never saw them again.

In honour of Emperor Zhu, Fengyang was privileged after 1949 and became a model county. Like Xinyang in neighbouring Henan, it lies in a rich plain watered by the Huai River and is vulnerable to both floods and droughts. During the Sino-Japanese War, it was ravaged and in the civil war that followed it witnessed fierce fighting between Communists and Nationalists over a key strategic prize, the railway linking Beijing to Nanjing which runs near Fengyang. During the fighting soldiers buried villagers alive, massacred the families of enemy fighters and ate the corpses of their prisoners.

The Communist victory in 1949 brought peace to the county. Fengyang took the lead in collectivizing agriculture and even had a machine tractor station run by Soviet advisers. The county of 335,000 people was soon boasting impressive grain yields. After Mao’s death, it continued to be a model, this time for the redivision of communal land. As such, it has been the subject of numerous studies. One, a compilation based on county Party records, was smuggled out of China in the wake of the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989. The 600-page document, entitled *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, was never intended to be circulated outside the top echelons of the Party, for it paints a detailed and appalling picture of the famine. What happened in Fengyang is significant because it reflects the role that Anhui played in the events of 1958-62. At the height of the famine, Anhui abandoned collective farming. At first Mao welcomed Anhui’s policies but later, suspecting a plot, he abruptly changed his mind and dismissed the province’s leader. Had he not done so, the recent history of China might have been very different.

The man responsible for both Anhui’s terrible famine and its reforms was a paunchy, aggressive former peasant called Zeng Xisheng. Zeng was a bully with a violent temper but during the Long March he had proved his courage as one of Mao’s bodyguards. He was slavishly loyal to Mao who trusted him, perhaps because he too was a Hunanese. Zeng had joined the Party in its early days, attended the Whampoa Military Academy and first met Mao in 1923. He achieved prominence as a signals intelligence officer in the Red Army and by the 1940s he was in charge of the Fourth Route Army in northern Anhui. When the Communists triumphed, he became the First Secretary of Anhui, a large rural province with a population of 33.5 million in 1953. As Mao pushed China faster and faster along the road to collectivization, Zeng was right behind him. When the Great Leap Forward started, he spared no efforts to show his devotion, and when Mao visited Anhui’s capital, Hefei, in 1958, Zeng brought the whole of the city’s population out to cheer him. When Mao called on the Chinese to make steel, Zeng showed this could be done not just in big furnaces but in every backyard. Soon small ‘backyard furnaces’ were melting down pots and pans all over China. Zeng penned numerous articles for *Red Flag* praising the Great Leap Forward and when Mao felt threatened at the Lushan summit, Zeng was outspoken in defending his policies against the objections of Peng Dehuai and others. In 1960 Mao promoted him, entrusting him with the leadership of both Anhui and Shandong.

The Great Leap Forward began in Anhui, as everywhere else, with claims of extraordinary success. In Fengyang that year one sputnik field supposedly grew a national record of 62.5 tonnes of tobacco in just 0.17 acres of land.<sup>32</sup> Fantastic pressure was exerted at every level to meet the quotas that Zeng set. Local Party secretaries were kept locked up in rooms for weeks until they agreed to meet their grain quotas and other targets. They in turn put their deputies through the same ordeal. So it went, from prefecture to county, from commune to brigade, from production team right down to the individual peasant. If a peasant didn’t agree to double or treble or quadruple his harvest the production team leader would beat him until he gave in. Nobody believed these targets could be reached but cadres reported that they had been. The lies went back up the pyramid from peasant to production chief, to brigade leader, to commune Party secretary, to county secretary, to prefectural leader and finally to Zeng Xisheng who reported to Mao. With each repetition, the lies became more and more fantastic, a ghastly parody of Chinese Whispers. All over the province, grain yields which were at best 726 lbs per 0.17 acres were inflated to an astonishing 33,000 lbs (14.7 tonnes).

Poor, impoverished Anhui now claimed to be flush with a fantastic bonanza and Zeng began to deliver large amounts of grain to other parts of the country and even abroad – in 1959 alone Anhui exported 200,000 tonnes although its grain harvest had shrunk by 4 million tonnes from the record 10 million tonnes harvested in 1958. In 1959, the state demanded that the peasants of Anhui hand over 2.5 million tonnes, that is 40 per cent of the harvest.<sup>33</sup>

In Fengyang, the year before had been bad enough. In 1958, the county had harvested 89,000 tonnes but reported 178,500 tonnes to cover up a sharp decline in output. Some of this grain was not even gathered in, but rotted in the fields because too many peasants were out making steel or building dams. After the peasants deducted what they needed to eat and to keep for seed, a surplus of only 5,800 tonnes was left to deliver to the state, but the grain levy was fixed at 35,000 tonnes on the basis of the false harvest reported. The missing 29,200 tonnes had to be extracted by force. In 1959, the county authorities lost all touch with reality. The county reported that 199,000 tonnes were harvested, a little higher than the reported figure for 1958, but in fact the harvest had further declined from 89,000 to 54,000 tonnes. Of this, the state demanded 29,464 tonnes.

In 1958 and 1959, Fengyang officials lied not just about grain production but also about the amount of arable land sown, the area of virgin land

ploughed, the number of irrigation works created and practically everything else. They said they had raised 166,000 pigs when the true figure was only 43,000. One production team claimed it had grown 19.6 acres of rapeseed when it had grown none at all. The brigade chief thought this lie was too modest and informed his superior that the team had grown 10 acres.<sup>34</sup> As the communes in the county trumpeted their new riches, the cadres were busy seizing whatever the peasants owned. All private property had to be handed over, including private land, draught animals, carts and even milling stones and houses. In Fengyang, the cadres commandeered over 11,000 houses, and to feed the backyard furnaces they took bicycles, scissors, knives, cooking utensils and even iron fences. When the Party needed more carts for its schemes, the cadres simply knocked down houses to take the necessary wood. Some peasants were left entirely homeless, others forced to live ten to a room. Even the huts that remained were stripped of their wooden doors and furniture to fuel the backyard furnaces. In the most fanatical villages, men were not even allowed to keep their wives who were forced to live separately.

In the run-up to the creation of the communes in 1958, the peasants went into a frenzy, eating as much of their food as they could and selling their livestock. People chopped down trees, dug up their vegetables and did everything to ensure that as little as possible was handed over. When the communes were established, the entire administration of daily life changed. Every minor decision or arrangement previously decided by the villagers now had to be passed to the commune headquarters which looked after around 5,000 households. By the end of September 1958, the communes were in full operation, and eating at the collective kitchens was compulsory.<sup>35</sup> By the Spring Festival of 1959, peasants in Fengyang and everywhere else in Anhui were starving. As food supplies dwindled fights broke out at the collective kitchens. The only food that was served was a watery soup. Those who were unfortunate received the thin gruel at the top of the pot, those who were lucky got the richer liquid at the bottom. Those too weak to collect their soup went without. Amidst this desperate struggle for food in early 1959, the Party launched the first anti-hiding-grain campaign in Anhui which, in its brutality, rivalled that in Henan. After the harvest of 1959 was taken away in the autumn, people began to starve to death in large numbers.<sup>36</sup> A sense of what life was like in Anhui in the winter of 1959-60 is evoked by one survivor, now a grandmother, who then lived in another county near Fengyang on the Huai River plain:

*In the first year [1958-9], we earned work points and the communes distributed grain to each family. This we kept at home. But in the second year [1959-60], there was nothing left at home, it had all been taken away. Nevertheless the village cadres came to every household to search for food. They searched every street and every building. They took away everything they could find, including our cotton eiderdowns, several bags of carrots and the cotton we had saved to make new clothes.*

*Our family still had one jar of food and we had to hide it behind the door. This jar was full of sweet potatoes which we had dried and ground up. When the cadres came, Second Aunt sat on the jar pretending to sew clothes and so they missed it. This jar helped us a lot. I think it saved our lives because in our household no one died. You could not cook the dried sweet potato but if you were very hungry, you just grabbed some of it with your hands. Almost every day the cadres came. They searched every home for nine consecutive days. Later, we buried the jar underground but the cadres came and poked the ground with iron rods to see if we had buried anything. Then we hid it somewhere else. This went on until February.*

*The communal canteen did not serve any proper food, just wild grasses, peanut shells and sweet potato skins. Because of this diet we had terrible problems. Some were constipated but others had constant diarrhoea and could not get beyond the front door. Yet the cadres still regularly inspected each house for cleanliness and if they found that a house or the area around it was dirty, they would place a black flag outside. If it was clean, they put up a white flag. I had to try and clean up the mess but at the time I had difficulty walking.*

*My legs and hands were swollen and I felt that at any moment I would die. Instead of walking to the fields to look for wild grass, I crawled and rolled to save energy. Several old women tried to get grass from ponds or rivers but because they had to stand in the water their legs became infected.*

*All the trees in the village had been cut down. Any nearby were all stripped of bark. I peeled off the bark of a locust tree and cooked it as if it were rice soup. It tasted like wood and was sticky.*

*At the time the villagers looked quite fat and even healthy because they were swollen but when they were queuing up at the canteen to eat, they would suddenly collapse and could not get up. Some could only walk using a stick.*

*One sister lived in a house that had been turned into the public canteen and her family were okay. Another sister became so weak she had no strength to draw water from the well. One day she suddenly fell down because her legs could not support her. In those days the ground was slippery because it was raining a lot. Her leg became inflamed and covered with running sores. She drained them with a knife. Our younger sister was only 10 then and was well enough to walk so she went to the older sister at the canteen to beg for food. She was given some buns which she hid by tying them around her waist and secretly brought her the food.*

*Another relative lived with her mother-in-law, who refused to give her any food. She stole grain to eat but had to go a long way to do this. Actually, there was food hidden under the kang but her mother-in-law kept this from her. She was only saved when her brother-in-law took pity on her and told her. So she could raid the pot and eat something.*

*No one in our family died. By February 1960, Grandpa's legs were completely swollen. His hair fell out, his body was covered in sores and he was too weak to open his mouth. A friend came and drained off some of the sores and this helped. We still had three small goats and an aunt killed two of them secretly to help him. Unfortunately, the cadres discovered this and took the carcasses away.*

*More than half the villagers died, mostly between New Year [1960] and April or May. In one of our neighbours' houses, three boys and a girl starved. In one brother's family two children died. Another family of sixteen died. Many families disappeared completely with no survivors at all. The production team chief's daughter-in-law and his grandson starved to death. He then boiled and ate the corpse of the child but he also died. When the village teacher was on the verge of death, he said to his wife, 'Why should we keep our child? If we eat him then I can survive and later we can produce another child.' His wife refused to do this and her husband died.*

*When people died, no one collected the bodies. The corpses did not change colour or decay because there was no blood in them and not much flesh. After people died, their families would not report the death to the production team. This was because they could get another portion of food. One family had three children and they died. The father hid the bodies and claimed their rations. In the whole village only seven or eight families did not suffer any deaths but some fled.*



*Later, when the wheat was harvested the situation improved, but we had to carry on eating at the canteen all through 1960. It was a good harvest and there were far fewer mouths to feed. The autumn harvest was also good and later we were allowed to eat at home. We had nothing to cook with and went to our neighbours to borrow pots. Some of the houses I went to were empty because everyone had fled.<sup>37</sup>*

This woman's account, extraordinary though it is, is by no means unusual. Records at Fengyang show that the entire population of some villages perished. In Xiaoxihe commune, where enthusiasm for collectivization was extreme, all the inhabitants of twenty-one villages died. In such villages, people frequently resorted to cannibalism but even this did not ensure survival because the corpses provided so little sustenance. Finally, when there was not even human flesh left to eat, all died. According to official records, there were 63 cases of cannibalism in Fengyang. *Thirty Years in the Countryside* recounts examples, among them the following: 'Chen Zhangying and her husband from Wuyi brigade of Damiao commune strangled their 8-year-old boy, boiled and ate him... Wang Lanying of Banjing brigade of Wudian commune not only took back home dead human bodies and ate them but also sold 2 *jin* [just under 2 lbs] as pork.'<sup>38</sup>

Just how extensive cannibalism was may never be known. It was official policy to cover up such incidents, even when arrests were made. Zhao Yushu, Fengyang's Party Secretary, insisted on describing cannibalism as 'political sabotage'. The Public Security Bureau was ordered secretly to arrest anyone connected with such practices. Of the 63 who were arrested, 33 died in prison. An interviewee from another county in Anhui recalled that a traditional practice called *Yi zi er shi* – 'Swop child, make food' – was common.

*The worst thing that happened during the famine was this: parents would decide to allow the old and the young to die first. They thought they could not afford to let their sons die but a mother would say to her daughter, 'You have to go and see your granny in heaven.' They stopped giving the girl children food. They just gave them water. Then they swopped the body of their daughter with that of a neighbour's. About five to seven women would agree to do this amongst themselves. Then they boiled the corpses into a kind of soup. People had learned to do this during the famine of the 1930s. People accepted this as it was a kind of hunger culture. They said: 'If your stomach is empty, then who can keep face?' One woman was reported and arrested by the Public Security Bureau. No one in the village criticized her when she returned from a labour camp a few years later.*

At first, the villagers tried to bury their dead in coffins but later, when the wood ran out, the living just wrapped the dead in cotton. Finally there was no cloth left, so at night people mounted guard over buried relatives until the flesh had sufficiently decomposed to prevent others from eating the corpse. In parts of Fengyang, officials issued regulations on the disposal of corpses to try and keep the scale of the deaths secret. An example of such regulations is cited in the report on Fengyang:

- 1. Shallow burials are prohibited. All corpses must be buried at least three feet deep and crops must be grown on top.*
- 2. No burials are allowed near roads.*
- 3. All crying and wailing is forbidden.*
- 4. The wearing of mourning clothes is forbidden.*

In the Zhangwan production team of Huan Guan commune, the regulations were even stricter. Peasants were told that they must not wear white clothes, the colour of mourning, but red ones. In China, red is the colour for celebrations. Another cadre in Wanshan brigade also insisted that peasants must pay a tax of 2 *jin* of alcohol before burying their dead. He would then strip the corpses of their clothes and take them home.

In many places where there was no one left to bury the dead, the bodies lay where they had fallen. One man I met recalled how as a child living in a small town, he and others had even played with the corpses. He remembered, too, how a villager went insane and wandered around for days ranting and raving with four or five heads tied around his neck. Elsewhere the bodies were buried beneath a thin covering of soil but the stiffened corpses were so bent that often the feet and head stuck out of the ground. For years to come, he said, the carelessly buried skeletons would re-emerge from the ground during a drought.

The first to die were often the strongest and most active members of a village who were worked the hardest. Left behind were the elderly and the children. By the end of 1961, Fengyang county was left with 2,398 orphans of whom 247 were given shelter by the authorities. Some were abandoned by parents who despaired of being able to feed them. Some were brought by their parents to Hefei, the provincial capital, to exchange for grain coupons. Sometimes they simply died on the streets. One interviewee remembered that as a child she had walked past small corpses covered with maggots lying at one of the main intersections in Hefei.

Zhao Yushu, the Fengyang Party Secretary, tried to stop people abandoning their children by forbidding Party officials from giving them succour. The Fengyang report quotes an official:

*A lot of children were being abandoned and Zhao Yushu forbade people to pick them up. He said, the more you pick them up, the more children will be abandoned. Once he said that he had seen a landlord abandon his child so he got the idea that anyone who did this was a bad class element; if a cadre rescued an abandoned child, it meant that he was bad too.*

The authorities denied most orphans any shelter. In the winter of 1962 when they implemented a new policy and began rounding up orphans, they found 3,304. Most of the children were under 10 years old and usually boys. The shortage of females from that generation is striking in Anhui. One village that I visited had around forty men who had been unable to marry because there were only two or three women survivors of their generation. Now in their mid-forties, they had been in their late teens during the famine. According to Ding Shu's book *Ren Huo*, the People's Liberation Army also later issued a regulation forbidding the recruitment of orphans. They were considered politically unreliable because it was feared that they might one day take revenge for the disaster which had befallen their families. The author also describes how he met a man who had been at a state boarding school in Anhui during the famine. The school had enough food but the parents of many pupils were starving and some decided to make their way to the school. He recalled how they arrived at the gates to beg for food from their children but the school refused to let them in.

A handful of brave souls risked their lives to speak out against what was happening. The Party Secretary of Yinjian commune in Fengyang, Zhang Shaobao, wrote a letter to Mao in 1959. Since he dared not use his own name, he signed himself 'Shi Qiu Ming' meaning 'To pursue clarity':

*To the Central Party and Chairman,*

*I write this letter without seeking any personal gain. All I care about is the interests of the Party and the people. I am therefore resolved to report the massive deaths which have taken place in Fengyang county this winter and spring. To my knowledge four villages in three*

*communes have had shocking mortality rates. In one village it is 5 per cent, in the second 11 per cent, in the third 15 per cent and in the fourth more than 20 per cent. In some villages 5-6 people are dying each day. Other villages are completely deserted because the people have either died or fled. I have seen with my own eyes 300 or 400 orphans whom the authorities have gathered together. Of these about 100 have died.*<sup>39</sup>

Those who addressed such letters to the county Party Secretary were arrested and accused of ‘spreading rumours and slandering the Party’. One local doctor, Wang Shanshen, the head of the Kaocheng hospital in Wudian commune, was arrested for telling the Party Secretary Zhao Yushu the truth. Zhao had asked the doctor if nothing could be done about the many people who had fallen sick. Dr Wang told him that people were dying not from any illness but from hunger. At one point a third of the population of Fengyang – 100,000 – was listed as sick, many of them with oedema.<sup>40</sup>

Protests did not just come from the county level. In 1959, Zhang Kaifan, Deputy Governor of Anhui, reported what he had discovered when he returned to his home town in Wuwei county. This town lies near the Yangtze River in the far south of Anhui, in one of the richest regions in China. Zhang approved a local decision to abolish the communal kitchens and then, at the Lushan summit, gave Mao letters and petitions that he had received. Mao condemned him as a ‘right opportunist’ and he was dismissed from his post. Others, too, were purged as rightists for advocating more moderate policies, including Li Shinong, another Deputy Governor, and Wei Xingye, the deputy propaganda chief for Anhui.

The case of Zhang Kaifan was significant because at Wuwei the local officials had independently decided to abandon the collective kitchens and the communes early in 1959. As a result, Anhui’s leader Zeng Xisheng had a number of officials arrested as ‘right opportunists’. A year later the complaints from Wuwei reached the ears of Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing. A Party history book includes a letter which Zhou wrote to Zeng in March 1960 urging him to investigate allegations that people had starved to death in Wuwei.<sup>41</sup> In 1961, a report on Wuwei was used by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping to urge the dismissal of Zeng. After 1979, when Deng Xiaoping overturned Mao’s policies, Zhang Kaifan was one of the first Party officials to be rehabilitated.

For many lower-ranking officials such a reversal of verdicts came too late. After the Lushan summit in July 1959 and the launch of the campaign to root out ‘right opportunists’, Zeng set quotas for victims. Anyone who had made any kind of negative comment would be targeted. In the autumn of 1959 tens of thousands in Anhui were labelled as anti-rightists. In Fengyang, even the magistrate, Zhao Conghua, was arrested on a charge of opposing the people’s communes. According to Party documents, he had said that the communes were premature and should have been tried out and tested before they were introduced throughout China. He also opposed collectivization and recommended dividing up the land again as well as abandoning the canteens and the steel-making campaign.<sup>42</sup>

To be labelled as a ‘right opportunist’ was in some places tantamount to receiving a death sentence. Anyone so labelled, and his entire family, was ostracized along with other outsiders such as landlords, counter-revolutionaries, Kuomintang followers and rich peasants, collectively known as the ‘five types of bad elements’. These received the lowest priority in the distribution of food. When ordinary peasants were dying of hunger, such a label spelt certain death. Tens of thousands of people in these categories fled their villages, many of them trying to get to the railway that would take them to Beijing and from there to the north or south-east to Shanghai. Few succeeded in boarding the heavily guarded trains. One source recalled how those trying to escape were locked in a cell at a ‘reception centre’ in Bangpu station, Anhui’s largest railway junction. There they were kept without food and each day the dead were taken and thrown into a pit. Those who did manage to board a train heading south-east were pulled off before they got to Shanghai. The authorities set up a camp on the outskirts of the city which provided food for work. No one was allowed to enter the city to beg. The most extraordinary attempt at flight took place in Wuwei county, on the north bank of the Yangtze River. Several sources claim that tens of thousands of starving peasants from the county decided to march to Nanjing, across the river to the east, in search of food and that to stop them crossing, the Party massed troops who opened fire, killing many.<sup>43</sup>

Anhui peasants also dreamt of reaching the rich and thinly populated lands of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. A few managed to get as far as Harbin, in Heilongjiang province, over a thousand miles to the north. A doctor in Harbin recalled that each day the stationmaster had to remove a dozen or more bodies of starved wretches who had expired in the railway station. In Fengyang, the authorities made every effort to stop the peasants from escaping. As early as December 1958, the Party set up road blocks to arrest fleeing peasants. The Fengyang report claims that the militia were successful, since only around 4 or 5 per cent of the population managed to escape during the famine. Of these, a few returned and were punished, but most did not. In contrast to Henan, many Anhui peasants had a tradition of vagabondage. In the slack season, peasants would set off as beggars, pedlars or labourers. So, in some parts of Anhui, the local Party Secretary would organize begging expeditions, issuing all those who wanted to leave with certificates and a little food. Such a certificate entitled one to buy train tickets. If this was not possible, then at least the peasants could take to the road. These journeys were fraught with danger, however, because peasants in other villages would sometimes seize outsiders, forcing them to work for nothing, or abduct the women.

On the other hand, flight could mean the difference between life and death. Ding Shu in *Ren Huo* recounts the story of one daring Anhui peasant who sneaked into the local Party Secretary’s office to steal a blank sheet of paper stamped with an official chop. With this he forged himself a travel permit and managed to reach remote mountains in Jiangxi province where he farmed some uncultivated land and survived the famine. When he returned to his village some years later, he discovered that his two brothers, who had stayed behind, had died of starvation.

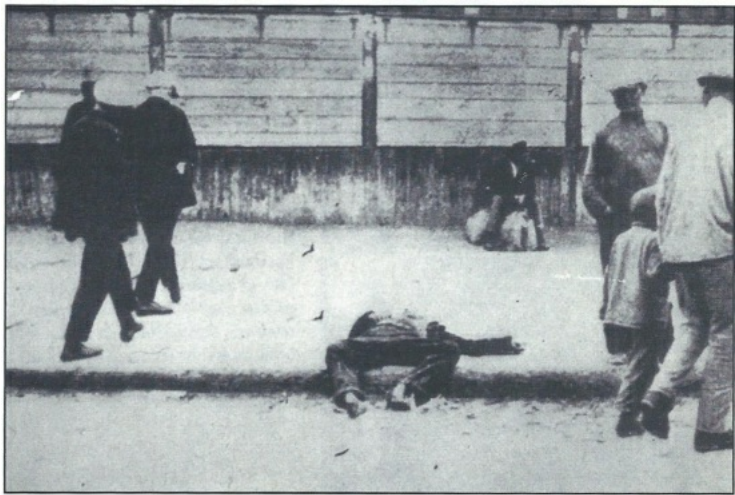
Perhaps the most horrible aspect of the famine in Anhui was that throughout it the state granaries were full. The existence of these granaries was confirmed by Zhou Yueli, the former secretary of Anhui’s leader, Zeng Xisheng, and by a number of county-level officials.<sup>44</sup> Just as in Henan, the famine was entirely man-made and its chief cause was the state’s excessive levy of grain. The Party cadres obeyed their orders and extracted double or triple the usual grain levy in accordance with imaginary grain harvests. Once this was done, the grain lay safely guarded in state granaries. A part was exported, but most of it did not travel far, indeed could not, because China lacked the means to move large quantities of grain. Some was held in emergency granaries controlled by the military, in accordance with Emperor Zhu’s motto ‘Dig deep tunnels and store grain’, and there it rotted. Mao adapted this dictum by adding his own words: ‘Dig deep tunnels, store grain and oppose hegemony.’ The latter referred to the perceived threat from either a US-backed Kuomintang invasion, or an attack by the Soviet Union.

But how, in Anhui and elsewhere in China, did the Party ensure discipline during the famine? Why did lower-ranking officials continue to obey orders? And why did the peasants not revolt?

Fear and terror explain their behaviour. A cadre who questioned orders faced death. The anti-right opportunist campaign had clearly demonstrated this fact but it also showed that opposition not only endangered the official but also his family, his relatives and even his friends. On the other hand, as long as an official held on to his position, he and his family could eat because they had access to the state supply system. In many villages, the only people to survive the famine were the Party Secretary and his immediate family. Peasants interviewed said that only if the village Party Secretary was either an honest man or too frightened to steal grain, would he and his relatives die of hunger.

The terror was also possible because the Party had already reduced a section of society to the status of slaves. During the land reform campaign, landlords and their families had been treated as outcasts. Now, those condemned by their class ancestry or by a political mistake had no rights at all, not even to food. They could be subjected to any cruel or inhuman form of punishment. If one section of society could be treated in this way it was but a short step to relegating peasants who were unable to comply with the demands for grain to the status of political criminals. They too became the enemy who could be treated without mercy. Zhao Chuanju, a deputy brigade chief quoted in the Fengyang documents, spelt this out: ‘The masses are slaves, they won’t listen or obey if you don’t beat or curse them or deduct their food rations.’ Zhao Chuanju personally beat thirty peasants to death.

As the famine worsened and the peasants lost hope, the cadres also found that they could only keep order by creating more and more terror. According to Fengyang statistics, 12.5 per cent of its rural population – 28,026 people – were punished by one means or another. The report lists the punishments: some were buried alive; others were strangled with ropes; many had their noses cut off; about half had their rations cut; 441 died of torture; 383 were permanently disabled; and 2,000 were imprisoned, of whom 382 died in their cells. Sometimes torture was used to force the peasants to give up their food supplies, sometimes to punish them for stealing food. The Fengyang report gives examples:



The famine in the Ukraine in 1932-3 was to presage an even greater disaster in China during the Great Leap Forward: *(above)* collecting the emaciated corpses of Ukrainian famine victims for cremation; *(below)* on the streets of Kharkov, the capital of the Ukraine, pedestrians pay scant attention to the starving







At the height of the Great Leap Forward peasants all over China were marshalled into massive labour-intensive projects: *(above)* members of the Gangkou commune in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province, march off to work behind red flags. This photograph was taken in the autumn of 1959 when the slogan was ‘Go all out and continue the Great Leap Forward and defeat rightism’; *(below)* peasants in Guangdong province at work on the Xinxihe reservoir. Armies of such peasants built reservoirs in every county in China but most collapsed within a few years



Chinas propaganda boasted of miraculous agricultural yields: *(above)* close planting of wheat reputedly produced a crop so dense that children could stand on top of it. This picture from *China Pictorial* was, like so many others, a fake — the children are standing on a bench hidden beneath the grain. Nevertheless, as the photograph below shows, China claimed she had outstripped even America in wheat production





The men responsible for the worst excesses during the Great Leap Forward included (*above*) Chen Boda, the editor of *Red Flag*. The son of a wealthy landlord, he became the most influential ultra-leftist thinker around Mao and his ideas inspired both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution; (*below*) Li Jingquan, the Party Secretary of Sichuan province. Under his leadership between 7 and 9 million people starved to death in a province famous for its agricultural surpluses. He was never criticized for his actions but lost power during the Cultural Revolution



(*Above*) A rare photograph of Zeng Xisheng, Party Secretary of Anhui province. Up to a quarter of the population of Anhui perished during the famine but Zeng lost power in 1962 for pioneering reforms which saved many more lives; (*below*) Henan province was the pace-setter during the Great Leap



Forward and its Party Secretary Wu Zhifu was Mao's devoted follower. Under Wu's leadership millions starved, especially in the Xinyang prefecture, but Wu's crimes were never publicly condemned



(Above) Mao inspects an experimental field in the famous Seven Li commune in Xinxiang county, Henan province, in 1958. It was here that he declared: 'this name, the People's Commune, is great'; (below) among the alleged scientific successes of the Great Leap Forward was the creation of giant vegetables. Here peasants parade a giant pumpkin



(Above) In Anhui Mao Zedong shows his approval for an innovation intended to help triple steel output — the backyard furnace. City-dwellers had to melt down whatever metal objects they could find to make steel; (below) peasants in even the remotest regions had to do the same in much larger furnaces. This propaganda photograph shows crude smelters built near Xinyang in Henan province. Party documents later described what happened in Xinyang as a 'holocaust'







(Above) The most hated part of the communes were the communal kitchens. This propaganda photograph of a village communal canteen shows peasants eating together – the reality was much harsher; (below) the communes were run as militarized units and were intended to be effective both in war and in peace. In some places this was taken literally to mean arming the peasants. Here members of the Dongjiao commune near Zhengzhou, Henan province, work with their weapons close at hand



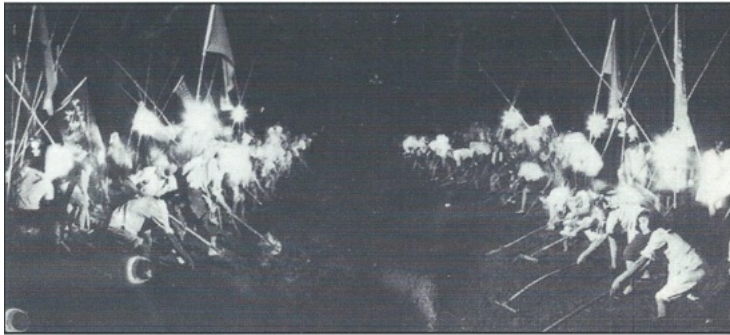


(Above) As part of the Great Leap Forward's attempt to wipe out all pests in a massive public hygiene movement, sparrows were exterminated. Here peasants parade the bodies of those killed during a single day; (below) all over the country peasants were inspired to create homemade tools and machines as part of the promised mechanization of agriculture. Since the steel produced in the backyard furnaces was useless, all these devices were made out of wood, like this truck built in Gaotang county in Shandong province. It was powered by a kerosene engine



(Above) The Great Leap Forward was, above all, an attempt to master nature. Nothing was impossible if the masses were mobilized to perform extraordinary feats of manual labour. To symbolize this peasants painted murals on their houses. This one, entitled 'Making the mountains bow their heads and the rivers give way', was painted in the Spring Flower commune near Xi'an in Shaanxi province; (left) one of the greatest of these senseless endeavours was the construction of the Red Flag Canal in Henan province. To divert water to a poor region, peasants spent years constructing a channel through mountains and along steep hillsides using the most primitive tools



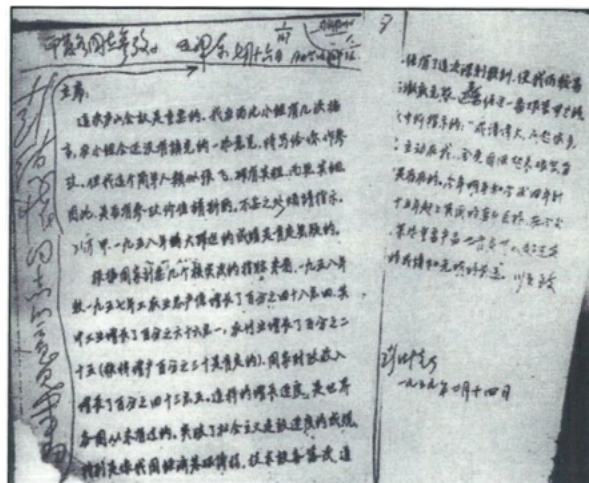


(Above) The slightest opposition to Mao's policies led to condemnation as a rightist. In this scene Zhang Bojun, Chairman of the Democratic Party of Peasants and Workers, is condemned as a rightist at a public meeting. His party was a remnant of political parties which had existed before 1949 but which were allowed to continue to give an impression of tolerance; (below) in the communes, peasants were made to work day and night and often slept in the fields. These peasants from Xianyang county in Henan province are engaged in deep ploughing which Mao believed would create bigger and better crops. In some places, furrows twelve feet deep were dug





Those who benefited from the Great Leap Forward included (*above left*) Hua Guofeng, who later became Mao's successor after denying that peasants were starving in Mao's home county; (*above right*) Zhao Ziyang, who first reported that the peasants were hiding grain – under Deng Xiaoping he later became General Party Secretary and launched the rural reforms; (*below right*) Hu Yaobang, who was promoted after inspecting Mao's home county and lying about what he saw there – he later regretted his actions and in 1979, after Deng Xiaoping made him General Party Secretary, he began to dismantle the communes; (*below left*) Kang Sheng, one of the few to die while still in favour – he implemented Mao's purges before 1949 and after, and gave his enthusiastic backing to the Great Leap Forward







The chief victim of the Great Leap Forward was Marshal Peng Dehuai (*top*) who presented a private letter to Mao during the Lushan summit in mid-1959 that criticized the Great Leap Forward (*middle*). The blurred photograph below was taken during the Lushan summit when Mao attacked Peng as a rightist



Two of the men who helped end the famine and earned Mao's hatred: (*above*) President Liu Shaoqi and his wife Wang Guangmei, photographed setting an example during the famine by picking wild fruit and grasses in the wooded hills of Wenquan near Guangzhou; (*left*) Zhang Wentian, one of those who spoke out at the Lushan summit in support of Peng Dehuai and who had evidence of the famine in Anhui





(Above) The tenth Panchen Lama of Tibet was one of the very few who dared to speak out during the famine. His report came close to accusing the Party of attempted genocide against the Tibetans. Soon after his report was delivered, he was imprisoned and did not regain the trust of the Communist Party until shortly before his death in 1989; (right) the writer Deng Tuo was among the first victims of the Cultural Revolution. Deng had written a history of famine relief in China which was republished in 1961 when he and a small group of intellectuals openly ridiculed Mao and his catastrophic policies



Mao Zedong, architect of the famine

In the spring of 1960, Li Zhonggui and Zhang Yongjia, Secretary and chief of Qiaoshan brigade, began to bury four children alive and they were only pulled out when their families begged for mercy. The children were buried up to their waists before being taken out and were traumatized by the experience.

Su Heren, chief of the Liwu brigade, buried alive a commune member, Xu Kailan, because she was crying and begging him to give her some rice soup to eat.

Cadre Hua Guangcui refused to give peasant Chang the noodles she had begged for her sick mother. He said the mother was so ill that she would soon die anyway. He told Chang to bury the old woman before the others returned from working in the fields. Hua said that if she did not do this immediately he would force her to bury her mother in the house when she died. Chang had no choice but to bury her mother alive.

Ding Xueyuan was arrested for slaughtering his pig. He was forced to work at a reservoir construction site in the daytime and then handcuffed in a cell at night. He died in his prison cell of torture.

Wang Yuncong, chief of Fengxing production team in Zongpu commune, detained Li Yijun and accused him of being a thief. He thrust a burning iron bar into Li's mouth.

Han Futian, chief of Zhaoyao production team of Yingjiang commune, captured a thief and chopped off four of his fingers.

Zhang Dianhong, chief of Huangwan production team of Huaifeng brigade in Huangwan commune, caught Wang Xiaojiao, a peasant who had stolen grain. He pushed iron wire through his ears, strung him up and beat him.

Huang Kaijin pushed iron wire through the ears of children and then connected the wires and joked that he was 'making a telephone call'.

Zhong Kecheng, secretary of Xinghuo brigade, raped a woman, Xiao Qing, by blackmailing her after catching her stealing.

Sun Yucheng, chief of Zhetang brigade of Banqiao commune, caught a woman stealing and shoved his gun up her vagina.

Zhang Yulan, deputy chief of Xinhua brigade, ordered an elderly woman and her two grandchildren to hand in 70 *jin* [67 lbs] of wild vegetables and grasses every day. He said that otherwise they would not be given any food. Eventually, the old woman and the two children died of illness and starvation.

In each county in Anhui, tens of thousands were beaten and imprisoned by kangaroo courts. Even after the cadres had forced the peasants to hand over their grain during the winter of 1959-60, the violence did not abate. The cadres had to use whips and sticks to force the emaciated and enfeebled



peasants to plant food for the next harvest and to stop them from eating the grain that they were supposed to sow. It is quite likely that if the Party had not halted the Great Leap Forward, the rural cadres would have carried on irrespective of the cost in human lives. Zhao Yushu, the head of Fengyang county, is alleged to have said: 'Even if 99 per cent die, we still have to hold high the red flag.'<sup>45</sup>

What happened next is equally incredible. The whole machinery of terror came to a stop and its perpetrators were put on trial. In January 1961, Anhui mounted a full-scale 'rectification' campaign and the peasants were summoned to testify against those who had terrorized them. A Fengyang Party document records the trial:

*In the extended meeting of five levels of cadres of Fengyang county, the atmosphere was intense and solemn. More than 90 per cent of the speakers at the meeting came from the families of people who had died. All of them voiced their complaints of wrong-doing and cried miserably and bitterly. The overwhelming majority of comrades in the meeting were moved to tears. Some told their stories from the morning until 7 p.m. and until their tears became dry...*<sup>46</sup>

The trial established the exact number of cadres who had 'made mistakes'. In the two worst communes of Xiaoxihe and Wudian, 39.1 per cent and 22.2 per cent respectively of the officials were declared guilty. In the entire county, the figure was 34 per cent, or 1,920 cadres. The rectification followed the classic pattern of such internal purges: the Communist Party decided that 70 per cent of its cadres were 'good' and that a further 25 per cent were 'good in nature' but had made mistakes. That left a mere 5 per cent as scapegoats, the 'bad elements' who had sabotaged Party policies. Only a handful of these, all low-ranking officials, were tried and sentenced as criminals. The county Secretary, Zhao Yushu, had only to make a self-criticism. Two senior county-level Party members were found guilty of making mistakes but neither was punished or expelled from the Party. Out of Fengyang's 91 commune leaders, only one was expelled and another tried in a civil court. Among the 787 cadres at the brigade level, 50 were arrested but only 9 were given prison sentences. At the team level, only 17 out of 3,318 cadres went to prison. The documents mention only one case where the 5 per cent quota was exceeded, that of Wudian commune where the county's first collective had been set up in 1955 and which became a provincial model. There, 26 per cent of the population had perished in the famine and cadres had murdered peasants just for stealing sweet potatoes: 13 per cent of its cadres were punished and 95 were executed.<sup>47</sup>

Another object of the rectification campaign was to return what had been forcibly taken from the peasants. This too was a failure. The communes had no cash or other resources with which to compensate individuals for their losses and the state would not help. Wudian commune gave its peasants little more than a quarter of what they were owed. The commune should have paid each household about 1,000 yuan, a tidy sum when monthly urban wages averaged 50 yuan. Fierce arguments broke out when it came to dividing up whatever tools or pots the communes possessed. Sometimes people insisted on getting their original possessions back and no others. Or they became angry when the communes handed back broken or damaged tools. The peasants refused to accept such tools, saying that they would now have to spend their own money repairing them. Some peasants were accused of lying and cheating in order to grab more than they were entitled to. Then there was the problem of households which had fled or died out. Who was entitled to their compensation? In some cases, cadres sold off the possessions of those who had fled and spent the money on funerals or other necessities, only to be confronted later by the original owners who came back demanding the return of their goods or compensation.

As well as instituting the rectification campaign, in 1961 Anhui also discarded the central tenet of the Great Leap Forward – complete public ownership of land. As Mao later remarked bitterly, the province reverted to capitalism. Just why the provincial Party Secretary Zeng Xisheng swung from an extreme 'leftist' position to one on the 'far right' is not clear. Perhaps, sensing that the tide was turning, he was motivated by self-interest. Perhaps he felt genuine revulsion at what he had done. For much of 1960 he had been in Shandong province to the north, where he had enforced Mao's policies as brutally as in Anhui. In August 1960, he came back to accompany the senior leaders Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi and Peng Zhen on a tour of Anhui. It was at this moment that Zeng first proposed giving the land back to the peasants and abandoning Mao's great endeavour. According to his doctor, Li Zhisui, Mao was still unwilling to confront his failures and was so depressed that he retreated to his bed. Zeng cautiously began to try out what came to be known as *ze ren tian* or 'contract field farming' under which peasants were given back partial control of their land and grain levies were reduced.

What Zeng attempted to do created a split in the Party that would tear it apart. One camp supported Zeng's *ze ren tian* and a return to private farming. The other camp, grouped around Mao, would admit no compromise and insisted on continuing with collective farming and the communes. Tensions rose in the winter of 1960-1 as central Party inspection teams produced incontrovertible evidence of the famine's terrible cost. The events which followed are described later but, ironically, Zeng Xisheng lost his position, and later his life, not for causing the death of so many people but for introducing the reforms which saved many more lives. He was dismissed in 1962 and appointed to a lowly position in Shanghai before being brought to work in the South-West China Bureau in Chengdu alongside Peng Dehuai. In 1967, Red Guards were sent from Hefei to seek him out. They accused him of causing the deaths of millions. He was dragged from his home and beaten to death. Officially, the cause of death was high blood pressure. When he was cremated at the Babaoshan crematorium for revolutionary heroes in Beijing, Mao praised his achievements.

In Anhui, Zeng Xisheng and his victims have been forgotten, wiped from the official memory. No photograph of him has been published for many years but older peasants still curse his memory. They say he held dancing parties at the height of the famine and forced women into his bed. Only a few will credit this crude, fat tyrant with daring to introduce reforms which in 1961 probably saved the lives of many of them.

How many did die in the famine in Anhui? Officials now claim that 2 million died and that a similar number fled. The 1989 *Anhui Statistical Yearbook* indicates a death toll due to the famine of 2.37 million out of a population of 33 million. Chen Yizi, the senior Party official who defected in 1989, claims the real figure is 8 million, a quarter of the population. Chen based his figure on the research he carried out after 1979 when he was given access to internal Party records. This enormous figure seems entirely plausible. In Fengyang, 51,000 are recorded as having starved to death just in the winter of 1959-60, and altogether a quarter (83,000) of its 335,000 people are estimated to have perished. If anything, the death toll might be higher still. Ding Shu estimates that in Fengyang 90,000 died while Chen Yizi has said that one in three perished. Interviews in other parts of Anhui suggest that Fengyang's death toll was not exceptional.

## The Other Provinces

‘With a basket of fragrant flowers, let me sing for you. I came to the fair country of Nanniwan. This is a good land where nature is beautiful, With crops, cattle and sheep everywhere. Once, the mountains of Nanniwan were barren without a trace of human habitation But now it is different, the new Nanniwan has changed, It is like the rich farmland south of the Changjiang River.’ Popular Communist song from the 1940s

The imagination balks at picturing a famine which brought hunger and fear to 500 million people across the vast territory of one of the world’s largest countries. For the first time, even in Sichuan which possesses some of the richest arable land in the world, peasants perished in their millions. Those in the rich and empty lands of the north, where life is usually easier, were reduced to a ration of 9 ounces of grain a day.<sup>1</sup> In Liaoning province, a centre for heavy industry, peasants who fled to its cities starved to death. In *A Mother’s Ordeal*, which recounts the life of a woman who grew up there, the author Steven Mosher paints this picture:

*Conditions must have been desperate in the countryside, for the streets of Shenyang [the capital of Liaoning] were full of hungry beggars. There were patched and tattered scarecrows with hollow cheeks and lifeless eyes who resembled living skeletons. There were children with pipestem limbs and swollen stomachs crying piteously for food. There were young men so crazed with hunger that they would snatch a leaf pancake out of your hand if you ventured too close.*

In Hebei province, which surrounds two of China’s richest cities, Beijing and Tianjin, conditions were equally bad. The Chinese journalist Ge Yang, who was exiled as a rightist to one rural area of Hebei, recalled how on the streets people said peasants were selling the flesh of dead children.<sup>2</sup> The authors of *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, the history of another rural district in Hebei, described what happened there:

*By late 1959 Wugong villagers were reduced to eating cornstalks. There was little fuel and no cooking oil. It would be two decades before cooking oil became readily available. That winter, vegetables grown in fields fertilised by excrement often had to be eaten uncooked... In the worst-off regions, weak, dispirited villagers left some of the meagre crop to rot in the fields... by winter and into next spring, there was no nutrition and no medicine. Sick people died: so did infants and the elderly. In Raoyang, a few husbands sold wives for food and cash.*

Perhaps the most terrible aspect of the famine was that there was nowhere to escape from it. Even in the most remote corners of the high mountains of Tibet or in the distant oases of Xinjiang in the far west, there was no sanctuary. An exodus was impossible because the country’s borders were closed and tightly guarded. People in Guangdong died trying to swim to Hong Kong just as Kazakh nomads in Xinjiang were shot trying to ride across the mountains to their fellow tribesmen in the Soviet Union. Since peasants had no way of knowing how widespread the famine was, many who fled their homes perished on the road, exhausted. Interviewees recalled seeing such beggars dying by roads in Gansu, Hubei and Guangzhou. Those who could tried to turn off the highways and venture on tracks up into the hills where the Party’s control was weaker and the chances of survival greater.

Flight had always been the traditional response to famine and so it was in 1958-61. Although some provincial leaders in Anhui, Henan and elsewhere set up roadblocks, they could not always prevent the peasants from escaping. At least a million fled Anhui;<sup>3</sup> a million and a half escaped from Hunan, equal to 4 per cent of the population; and in one year alone at least 1.6 million emigrated from Shandong.<sup>4</sup> Henan peasants followed tradition and headed for the north-western provinces. Sichuan peasants set out for minority regions in the surrounding mountains or trekked across the border to Guizhou province. In Hebei, some local governments even organized a migration to Manchuria which was reputed to have land to spare and jobs in its giant iron and steel works. Minority areas lured many, both because they were less densely populated and because the Party dealt more leniently with the ethnic Hans within them, as its first priority was to control the indigenous peoples. At least a million refugees made their way to Inner Mongolia in just twelve months.<sup>5</sup> Several hundred thousand are thought to have moved to the Tibet Autonomous Region, prompting Western newspapers to suggest that the rebellious Tibetans were being deliberately swamped with immigrants.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to put a figure on this mass internal migration but it may have been in the order of at least 10 million.<sup>7</sup>

These migrations were often accompanied by the break-up of families. In Gansu the divorce rate rose by 30-40 per cent and in a few counties by as much as 60 per cent during the famine.<sup>8</sup> The peasants frequently sold their wives in exchange for food or money. Sometimes the wives had no choice but to leave when the last food was reserved for blood relatives or when, though there was nothing to eat, their husbands felt bound to stay and tend the graves of their ancestors. In some areas of China, a woman could easily find a new husband. In Heilongjiang, with its large labour force of immigrant workers, marriageable women were in short supply and it was common for two or even three men to share a woman between them. Often two brothers would agree to cohabit with one woman.<sup>9</sup> Another source states that in general, ‘the poorer the region, the greater the amount of wife selling. To hide the shame, the wives were called cousins... If the chief family earner died, a teenage daughter might be sold to the highest bidder in a distant place to obtain grain to keep the rest of the household alive.’<sup>10</sup>

When the famine was over, local governments in parts of Sichuan and Gansu negotiated agreements with authorities elsewhere, requiring them to force the wives to return to their original homes. Often they refused to go back to husbands who had sold them.<sup>11</sup> In Hebei, one such husband went to court to recover his ‘property rights’ but the court decided for the wife.<sup>12</sup> Prostitution was also frequently reported. In Gansu, one former prison inmate recalled how local peasant women came to the gates to prostitute themselves in the hope of obtaining a *wotou*, or bun, to eat. In Anhui, too, there were so-called ‘brothel work teams’ where cadres kept women who would sleep with them in exchange for food.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the famine, some women migrated to areas of Henan or Gansu where large tracts of arable land had been depopulated. After the dismissal of Gansu’s hard-left leader in 1961, women made up two-fifths of the immigrants in the province and in Hebei peasants moved to resettle farmland in the Xinyang district.

In their bid to find a place of safety, women had to abandon children whom they could no longer feed. Some children were sold in the cities or dumped at railway stations or in hospitals. A nurse in Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province, recalled one such incident:

*During that winter of 1959, there was an event which occurred in my hospital. The nurse of the night shift went upstairs to go to bed. She stumbled over something and screamed in panic. People came running, thinking she had been attacked. After a while, when she could speak, she said she had found a strange object on the stairs leading to the third floor. Others followed her there and found a small cardboard box in which a baby lay wrapped in cotton rags. On a scrap of old newspaper were written the words: ‘To kind-hearted people, please look after*

*her. From a mother who regrets her faults.’ At the beginning, only female babies were abandoned but later on boys were left behind by those who hoped the hospital would feed them.*

Other infants were left by the roadside. In the yellow-earth country of north-west China, people abandoned their children by the roadside in holes dug out of the soft soil. One interviewee described what happened:

*Those who still had the strength left the village begging and many died on the road. The road from the village to the neighbouring province was strewn with bodies, and piercing wails came from holes on both sides of the road. Following the cries, you could see the tops of the heads of children who were abandoned in those holes. A lot of parents thought their children had a better chance of surviving if they were adopted by somebody else. The holes were just deep enough so that the children could not get out to follow them but could be seen by passers-by who might adopt them.<sup>14</sup>*

Still others were abandoned in caves and mine-shafts in the mountains. Stories also circulated about how, in some places, villagers would kill and eat such infants. In western Xinjiang parents gave their children to the nomadic Mongol or Kazakh herdsmen to look after as they were thought to have enough milk and other food. Many children who were adopted or purchased met unhappy fates. One interviewee from Nanjing told the story of how his neighbour, a childless worker, bought a 6-year-old girl from a starving Anhui peasant. She was cruelly teased by other children in the housing block as a ‘stray dog’ until her life was made so unbearable that she finally killed herself. Another source recalled that a writer and Party member in Hefei, Anhui province, was dismissed after purchasing a young girl from a starving peasant and later using her as his concubine.

When the peasants could not flee, the only alternative was to rebel. All over China, desperate peasants organized attacks on local granaries. Sometimes the peasants fought each other: one source recalled a battle between Hebei and Henan peasants armed with sticks and rocks in which 3,000 were killed. It is hard to be certain about the scale and frequency of such attacks and fights but they were certainly not rare, especially in 1960. According to Chen Yizi, there were numerous attacks on lower Party officials: ‘There were some small-scale rebellions and even cases when whole counties rose up against the government, sometimes, as in Guizhou province, led by a village Party Secretary.’<sup>15</sup> In Hebei province, Muslim Hui robber bands mounted an attack on a granary at Hejian which led the authorities to equip the militia with machine guns and to encircle the granaries with barbed wire.<sup>16</sup> In Fujian, when a hundred peasants stormed a grain store under the leadership of a village Party Secretary, the authorities called out the army.<sup>17</sup> In Shandong, former Kuomintang officers were accused of organizing the rebellions there and were executed.<sup>18</sup> There are also reliable reports of riots and small-scale attacks on state granaries in Anhui. In Sichuan, a similar attack which has been widely recorded occurred in 1961 in Ruijin county. There, in the mountains east of Chengdu, peasants successfully stormed a granary and carried off the grain. Later, the head of the local militia was arrested and imprisoned for failing to order his men to open fire on the peasants. A similarly successful attack took place at Zhengya in the same province because the local militia, whose own families were starving, did nothing to prevent it.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the granaries, starving bands of peasants frequently attacked trains. After one such band blocked a train on the line from Hebei province to Shandong and pilfered it for food, the authorities installed twelve guards on each train. Heavily armed guards also manned the trains carrying export grain to the Soviet Union. In Gansu, desperate peasants even attacked army trains. An eyewitness related how a garrison was cut off when the local populace stormed one train:

*The starving people behaved as if they had discovered a ‘new continent’ and crowded around the train begging for food. The soldiers raised their rifles with sharp bayonets and confronted the crowd. These people knew they had little to lose. Their only hope of surviving was to seize the grain on the train. The crowds erupted like boiling water and the soldiers trembled although they had rifles in their hands. One of them nervously pulled the trigger and the explosion shocked and agitated the crowd. They rushed on to the train and grabbed sacks of grain. The desperate guards fired their guns into the air, but this did not work. The train was quickly looted. A few days later, another train approached the station and many, many starving people flooded the place. They were agitated and carried guns, buckets and so on. But this time the soldiers fired their guns directly at the people. The station became a battlefield. People had to run away. How could the ‘people’s army’ now shoot its own people? Later, it was said that the military garrison had itself been without food for three days.<sup>20</sup>*

In a similar case, the local populace stormed a military train carrying grain for starving soldiers and scientists working to create China’s first nuclear bomb. In the middle of Qinghai, a gigantic complex of laboratories and workshops called the Ninth Academy had been established on a desolate plateau. Surrounding China’s ‘Los Alamos’ was a complex of labour camps and state farms. Despite the priority given to building the bomb, especially after 1959, both scientists and prisoners ran out of food. In 1960, Marshal Nie Rongzhen, who was in charge of the project, reportedly held a telephone conference begging all military commanders to donate food. A train carrying these supplies was blocked by starving villagers before it arrived. When the armed guards did not open fire, the villagers ransacked it. According to an article published in China in 1989, when the peasants discovered the food was going to the People’s Liberation Army, they returned and put the sacks of grain back on the train.<sup>21</sup>

Such attacks and rebellions were numerous enough for President Liu Shaoqi to issue a dire warning in 1962. If nothing was done, he said, China would face a civil war as severe as that of the Soviet Union in 1918-21. He issued instructions to prepare for the imposition of martial law, although he stopped short of authorizing troops to open fire on civilians. Yet no matter how rebellious the peasants felt, the majority were usually incapable of organizing concerted resistance. They could not gather in sufficient numbers and almost always lacked arms. Indeed, at the height of the famine, they possessed virtually nothing and hunger had gravely weakened them. The militia guarding the grain stores were invariably stronger and better fed, and could usually rout them. If the militia failed to suppress an uprising or joined it, then the army was always available. Most army troops were well provided for and so did not starve during the famine. The only real threat to the government might have come from urban dwellers but they never became as desperate as the peasants.

The famine may have tested the loyalty of Communist cadres but few of them dared break ranks either to join a rebellion or to distribute state grain on their own authority. One well-known exception was the author Zhao Shouli in Shanxi. He used his authority in Yangcheng county to persuade the authorities to distribute grain and is credited with having thus saved many lives. Ding Shu in *Ren Huo* recounts that for this ‘crime’, Zhao was seized by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. They then asked local people to come forward and testify against him. Although the locals refused, he was still struggled and later killed.<sup>22</sup>

Not everyone lacked the courage to speak out on behalf of the peasants. In *Ren Huo*, Ding Shu recounts the example of a woman worker called Liu Guiyang who went to Beijing and pasted up the slogan ‘Get rid of the people’s communes’ outside Zhongnanhai, where Mao lived. Such stories are credible. One interviewee said he saw a wall poster put up in the campus of the Agricultural University in Changsha, Hunan province, where he was studying in 1959. It ran to nine pages and described how the peasants were starving and how they hated the communal eating. It went on to accuse village leaders of stealing grain and oil to feed themselves. The poster attracted the attention of hundreds of people who stood around reading and discussing it. The next day it was torn down, but the interviewee said similar posters appeared at other universities in the city. People also spoke out against the Great



Leap Forward in open meetings in Changsha. The same thing happened in Nanjing University and at Wuhan in Hubei province where students and teachers put up posters. People also used the meetings which the Party organized to criticize Peng Dehuai and ‘right opportunism’ after the Lushan summit as occasions to speak out. Students, because they were often sent out to work in the countryside, had seen what the real harvests were and had witnessed for themselves the children with swollen bellies and the cruelties inflicted by village leaders. They knew that the entire Great Leap Forward was both a sham and a catastrophe. Even so, the great majority of the population were terrorized into silence. Obedience was ruthlessly enforced by an all-pervasive surveillance apparatus. In Anhui, one interviewee recalled the reaction when a small handwritten notice was pasted up in a toilet in an office in Hefei. It said ‘Down with Tyrant Zeng, capture his demon wife alive!’ The police were called in with dogs to try and track down the author.

## Gansu

In all China the worst-hit province was probably Anhui, but poor and backward Gansu ranked a close second. The province straggles along what is called the Gansu Corridor to the far west and in 1958 it had a mixed population of around 12 million Han Chinese, Hui Muslims, Tibetans, Mongols and other minorities.<sup>23</sup>

Before the Great Leap Forward, some local leaders, including the Deputy Governor Sun Diancai, had been expelled from the Party or demoted for resisting collectivization.<sup>24</sup> Gansu’s First Secretary was another Red Army veteran, Zhang Zhongliang, who was devoted to Mao. After the Lushan summit, he wrote articles heaping praise on the Great Leap Forward and insisting that its policies were so successful that even his poor province had grain to spare. In the winter of 1959, Zhang went to Beijing to meet Zhou Enlai and offered to send his surplus to more needy provinces. Zhou took him at his word. When Zhang returned, he organized his urban officials into work teams and sent them out to collect grain from every village. According to one eyewitness the requisition teams adopted a strategy called ‘politeness first, forcefulness second’; he described what happened in one commune:

*The commune Secretary shouted at the peasants, telling them to hand in the grain in response to the Party’s and Chairman Mao’s call. The peasants kept silent but were clear in their minds that if they did so, it was as good as giving up their lives. This kind of mobilizing speech by the commune leader did not work. He saw in the eyes of the peasants anguish, sadness and disappointment. Actually, the commune leader himself was not at all happy with his superior’s order but he dared not disobey him. He knew how he would end up if he refused.*

*Nevertheless, the work teams began their action. When they looted a village, it was termed ‘imposing grain levies’. The sound of crying, begging and cursing echoed everywhere. Afterwards, the peasants were consumed by anger and hatred and a sad feeling of impotence. They had only a very small amount of beans and potatoes left in their houses. Young people now left their home village while the elderly and children scavenged for grass seeds, tree bark and so on to eat. Within a month, the famine began to worsen. The villages became silent, bereft of human activity.*

In 1988 the Chinese magazine *October* published an article describing how the work teams in Gansu used 128 forms of torture to extract the grain: ‘People were either tortured or starved to death. Some were tied up and beaten, or left hanging until they died. People were not allowed to eat grains and [were] stopped from digging wild vegetables. All they could do was starve.’<sup>25</sup>

An article by a demographer, Peng Xizhe, alleges that not only did Gansu have no surplus grain, it did not even have enough to feed its own population.<sup>26</sup> In 1958, per capita grain output fell by 19 per cent. In 1959 it fell by a further 32 per cent. In the following two years it was half the size of the 1957 harvest, which had barely been sufficient. Even in 1965 the grain harvest was still 25 per cent below that of 1957. In some areas, a third of the population starved to death between 1958 and 1961. In the Zhangye region of western Gansu this amounted to 300,000 people, including some 40,000 in the city of Zhangye itself.<sup>27</sup> There the local authorities set up a special department charged with collecting and counting the corpses. Ruan Dingmin, head of the Zhangye propaganda office, sent a daily report to Lanzhou which was read by Gansu’s Party Secretary Zhang Zhongliang. When, in 1961, Beijing sent Wang Feng, a senior official in the Central Committee’s Organization Department, to investigate the famine, he could not believe the contents of these reports and summoned Ruan Dingmin to testify in person. Wang Feng also dispatched a medical relief team to the area around Zhangye and one of its members recalled what they witnessed there:

*Early one morning, we stopped at a big village but found few signs of life around the low mud huts. A few people could be seen who were so weak, they could hardly beg for food. The team leader raised his voice, shouting: ‘Old folks, come out now! Chairman Mao and the Communist Party have sent us doctors to rescue you!’ He shouted over and over again. Eventually, those still alive crawled out of their houses. These were people struggling on the edge of death. If they fell over, they were unable to get up again.*

*The team found one group of dead bodies after another. I pushed open the floor of one hut and had to draw back because of the stink. A low groan came from inside and I saw two or three people lying still in the darkness on a kang. At the front lay an old man and one of his hands pointed at something. Together with him lay a woman who had long been dead and whose decomposing body was the source of the stench. The old man’s hand was pointing at a small human body, four limbs spread out, mouth open wide. It looked as if the child was crying out but in fact the body had been lying dead for days.*

The medical team had brought syringes with them to inject a mixture containing glucose. The famine victims were then given sorghum or bean soup but this caused more deaths. The starving swallowed the food but their stomachs were unable to absorb it and burst. Most of them died.<sup>28</sup>

Other severely hit counties in Gansu included Dingxi and neighbouring Tongwei. Zhang Shangzhi, a reporter from the *Gansu Daily*, recounted in an article how on a journey to his home village in Tongwei county, he saw dead bodies along the roadside, in the fields, indeed everywhere he looked. No one had buried the corpses. He reached his own village only to find that three members of his family had already starved to death. Around 100,000 people died of hunger in Tongwei.<sup>29</sup>

In 1994 *Kaifang*, a Chinese magazine published in Hong Kong, reported that in the Longxi area of Gansu during the famine, people ate children including their own.<sup>30</sup> The article relates a case where parents ordered their 7-year-old daughter to boil some water to cook their little son. When the baby was eaten, the daughter was told to boil some more water. Realizing that she would be next she knelt down, ‘begging her father not to eat her and saying “I will do anything if you do not eat me.”’ Such stories of cannibalism in Gansu have appeared in other Chinese publications, sometimes thinly disguised as fiction. One such novel, *Hungry Mountain Village* by Zhi Liang, describes how during the famine a Beijing journalist was exiled as a rightist to an unnamed province in the north-west. There peasants not only ate children but adults too.

The report which Wang Feng drew up on the famine in Gansu led to the dismissal of Zhang Zhongliang but he was not otherwise punished. Later, the

report fell into the hands of Red Guards who travelled across China to find him in Jiangsu province where they struggled him. He survived and, according to some sources, died peacefully on Hainan Island (and according to others in Nanjing) in the early 1980s.

It is hard to find a reliable figure for Gansu's death toll. The lowest figure of 696,000 out of a population of 12 million appears in Gansu's official population statistics. Chen Yizi, whose team investigated Gansu after 1979, states that 1.2 million died. In a biography of Qian Ying, a senior Party official who accompanied Wang Feng on his visit to Gansu, a figure of 1.3 million is mentioned. I was told by other Chinese sources that the true figure is 3 million.

Under Wang Feng, Gansu, like Anhui, became in 1961 a laboratory for experiments in private farming. Mao stopped these at the end of 1962 and four years later Wang Feng was toppled and severely beaten by Red Guards. Gansu once again became a bastion of ultra-leftism. It did not recover from the famine during the Mao era and there was another severe famine in 1974 and 1975 when peasants tried to flee elsewhere in search of food.<sup>31</sup>

Other provinces in the north-west of China suffered equally during the Great Leap Forward but fewer details have emerged. The small neighbouring province of Ningxia to the north of Gansu seems to have been hard hit. Life in a labour camp there during the famine is powerfully described by the author Zhang Xianliang in his autobiographical book *Grass Soup* (see [Chapter 12](#)). He recounts that those outside the labour camps had less to eat than those inside. Travelling in Ningxia during the 1980s, I was told that during the famine cannibalism had become common among the peasants living in the barren mountains to the south of the capital, Yinchuan.

In the adjacent province of Qinghai, the ultra-leftist Party Secretary Gao Feng was also dismissed in 1961. After an investigation by Wang Zhao, a senior official sent from Beijing, he was accused of causing 900,000 deaths. Qinghai is part of the Tibetan plateau and was at the centre of the Tibetan revolt described in the next chapter. Huge numbers of Chinese prisoners were sent to its bleak uplands to work in a chain of large labour camps. There they built roads, railways and the nuclear research centre, the Ninth Academy. At least 200,000 of the prisoners in these camps starved to death.

The famine was no less harsh in the south-west of China. In Guizhou province, next door to Sichuan, out of a population of around 16 million, 1 million died. In the region of Zunyi, in northern Guizhou, the site of a famous Party meeting during the Long March, only one in eight survived. In other places, such as Jinsha county, a quarter of the population died. Most of the deaths occurred not among the province's minorities but in the valleys populated by Han Chinese, such as the counties of Sinan, Yuqing and Yinjiang. The main cause was the violent appropriation of grain. An investigation by a team sent from Beijing later led to the execution of the Party Secretary of Sinan county and the suicide of two other leaders in charge of counties with large death tolls.<sup>32</sup>

## Sichuan

The province of Sichuan was crucial to the success of the Great Leap Forward. If Mao's agricultural policies worked there, then China would have huge surpluses, for the Sichuanese traditionally boast that in a good year they can produce enough to feed five other provinces. Equally, a famine in 'Heaven's Granary', as Sichuan is called, would be hard to explain or justify. Within the province, Mao put his trust in a tough ultra-leftist called Li Jingquan. A Shanxi peasant who became Mao's devoted follower during the Yanan period, Li had ruled Sichuan with an iron fist since entering the province after the Kuomintang's defeat. Land reform was successful and popular but when in the early 1950s the state began to monopolize the important grain market, things soon began to go wrong. Party cadres banned private trading and imposed ever higher grain quotas. Li was determined to show that the first stages of collectivization would result in more grain. A violent and aggressive figure, he tolerated no dissent or opposition. Grain purchasing targets became excessive as the incentive to grow grain diminished. When the state exerted pressure on local leaders and peasants to deliver more grain to the state, some killed themselves or died in struggle sessions.<sup>33</sup>

Li implemented the 1957 anti-rightist campaign in Sichuan vigorously and even wanted to raise the quota of arrests beyond that recommended by the centre. In some cultural units, two-thirds of the staff were labelled as rightists. Inevitably, Li also threw the province into the Great Leap Forward and dismissed any officials who questioned what was going on. One victim was the provincial deputy propaganda minister, Ye Shi, who is reputed to have said that the exaggerated reports of the success of the advanced co-operatives were like people who slapped their own cheeks to make themselves look healthier.

In Sichuan, people seem to have begun to die in large numbers during the first winter of 1958-9. Cadres were sent to seize large amounts of grain but most of the autumn harvest was never collected. In rural Sichuan most of the men had to work round the clock making steel and building dams. Accounts of what happened in Sichuan mirror those from Anhui or Henan. For instance, in different parts of Sichuan I was told the identical story of how peasants artificially created an 'experimental field' by moving the rice or wheat plants closer together. A goose egg was then placed on top of the crop to demonstrate its density. This was what happened in 1958 when Mao visited the model Red Splendour commune. Li Jingquan went to great efforts to ensure that the truth behind this charade was not revealed. When, a year later, Liu Shaoqi went to the same commune, local officials locked up anyone who might have been ready to give the game away and hid them in an old temple. After an informant revealed this to Liu, he walked past the temple and asked to look inside. There he questioned the peasants but they were too terrified to do more than smile and mumble.<sup>34</sup> Many of the peasants in this commune subsequently starved to death.

As in Anhui and Henan, fantastic reports of bumper harvests, called the 'exaggeration wind', led in turn to the brutal seizure of grain. Those who refused to hand over all their grain were beaten and tortured. After the Lushan summit, Li Jingquan also set about trapping officials who might be guilty of disloyalty. On his return, he circulated a document containing Marshal Peng Dehuai's criticisms and then asked all cadres at grade 17 and above whether or not they agreed (all officials are graded from 1 to 24, with 1 being the highest). Most realized what was afoot but some endorsed what Peng had said and were arrested as 'right opportunists'. Sichuan officials who spoke out or tried to ameliorate the consequences of the famine later met with the most violent persecution. One such was the father of Jung Chang, the author of *Wild Swans*. A dedicated revolutionary and a senior official in Chengdu, Wang Yu was horrified at what he saw in the countryside although local officials prevented him from seeing the worst. He later suffered from oedema and fell into depression. In 1961, he withdrew from his work and spent months in hospital. This was enough to provoke persecution during the Cultural Revolution when he was attacked for 'the waning of his revolutionary will'. He died in 1974 half insane after a long period in a work camp.

Many eyewitnesses have said that, as elsewhere, at the height of the famine in Sichuan the granaries were full even though some of the province's grain and livestock was exported to other regions of the country. Just how much grain left the province remains a secret, perhaps because, unlike Gansu's First Secretary, Li was not dismissed in 1961. Despite Sichuan's huge death toll, he was protected by Mao and may have won the gratitude of other leaders for supplying them with food in their hour of greatest need. Li was also careful to keep a low profile when, in 1962, he freed his peasants from some of the restrictions of collective farming under a national policy that Liu Shaoqi introduced as the 'three freedoms, one guarantee', or *san zi, yi*

bao.

Sichuan's death toll was enormous. Estimates range from 7 to 9 million out of a population of at least 70 million.<sup>35</sup> The lowest figure revealed by official population statistics is 7.35 million but other sources, including Chen Yizi and the Chinese demographer Peng Xizhe, suggest a figure of around 9 million. This last estimate suggests a death rate among the rural population of close to one in seven. This seems plausible, for in just one prefecture, Yibin, there were 1 million famine deaths. Some villagers, living in a fertile part of the province, thought that 20 per cent or even a third of the population had died.<sup>36</sup> Cannibalism was widespread, especially in the worst-hit districts such as Yanan, south-west of Chengdu. Even in Deng Xiaoping's home village of Guang'an, peasants went to beg for food in the cities.

Li Jingquan's decision to implement Liu Shaoqi's policies may explain why Mao encouraged his downfall in the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards waged particularly violent battles in Sichuan's cities. Li survived, but one of his sons was beaten to death and his wife committed suicide. Li was rehabilitated and given an honorary position by Deng Xiaoping when he returned to power in 1978. Yet he was never allowed to go back to Sichuan, where public discussion of the famine is still taboo.





## *The Panchen Lama's Letter*

‘When we heard there was large-scale famine, it was a new thing. In Tibet food supplies had been sufficient for centuries. Agriculture was old-fashioned but sufficient. In the past, one or two individuals may have died from starvation, that is possible. Otherwise it was unheard of.’ The Dalai Lama, 1995

In 1962, Tibet's second highest religious leader, the Panchen Lama, wrote a report in which he came close to accusing the Chinese Communist Party of attempted genocide. No other group in China suffered more bitterly from the famine than the Tibetans, of whom perhaps one in five died during these years. In the birthplace of the current Dalai Lama, Ping An county in Qinghai province, at least 50 per cent of the population starved to death.<sup>1</sup>

The Tibetans have traditionally lived scattered across an enormous region that spills over the borders of present-day China, farming the valleys between the highest mountains of the world and roaming with their herds across a vast and desolate plateau. After the eleventh century, their conversion to Tantric Buddhism, imported from India, turned a warlike people into the most intensely religious society on earth. The focus of religious and economic life became the large monasteries subject to the rule of reincarnated lamas. This theocracy was little changed by the Mongols or Manchus who occupied China. When the British invaded Tibet in 1905, they found a medieval society cut off from the outside world. The Nationalists failed in their turn to impose their rule over Lhasa and the Tibetans lapsed into a self-imposed isolation that was only shattered by the invasion of the People's Liberation Army in 1950-1.

The Chinese Communists created an autonomous region in central Tibet and divided the rest of the Tibetans among different provinces. The majority now lived within the newly drawn borders of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan provinces. There they were subject to the same policies, the ‘democratic reforms’, which were applied all over China. The monasteries were dismantled, the land and livestock they controlled were given to the poor peasants, individuals were labelled according to their class and, after the initial stages of mutual-aid teams and co-operatives, communes were set up. Under the terms of a seventeen-point agreement that the Dalai Lama signed with Beijing in 1951, inner Tibet (which in 1965 would formally become the Tibet Autonomous Region or TAR) was, temporarily, excused from introducing these democratic reforms. No such concessions were made to the rest of the Tibetans who rose in revolt, some as early as 1952. When collectives and higher collectives were established in the mid-1950s, resistance turned into large-scale bloodshed, especially among the Tibetans in Sichuan who are known as Khampas. Many retreated to Lhasa from where, in 1959, the Dalai Lama was forced to flee amid fierce fighting. The rebellion was put down with great brutality and up to 100,000 Tibetans fled to India where the Dalai Lama had sought sanctuary. For those who remained behind, the effects of the Great Leap Forward brought fresh hardships.

Although the collectivization which sparked off the rebellion was a nationwide policy, many Tibetans are still convinced that the ensuing famine was a deliberate attempt to punish them further for their revolt. The majority of Tibetans had the misfortune to live in those provinces – Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu – which were devastated by some of the most brutal and fanatical leaders in the whole country. Here, Han Chinese and Tibetans suffered alike from the famine. In the Dalai Lama's birthplace in Ping An county, as many Chinese as Tibetans died of hunger. Even Chinese who were resettled in Qinghai died. Out of 5,000 Henanese dispatched in 1959 to Tongren county in Qinghai, only 2,000 were left when the group was sent home two years later, the majority having starved to death.<sup>2</sup> Yet many Tibetans still feel they were subject to a far harsher fate than the Chinese. First, they were the victims of policies imposed on them by alien conquerors. Second, the wholesale destruction of their monasteries and the arrest of their lamas which took place in the 1950s and not, as is generally believed, during the Cultural Revolution, were viewed as a deliberate attempt to erase the basis of Tibet's civilization. And finally, the Tibetans were peculiarly vulnerable to the destructive consequences of Maoist agricultural policies.

Tibetans were either nomadic herdsman or farmers dependent on barley. In the Great Leap Forward, the Party forcibly settled the nomads and this, as in Kazakhstan under Stalin, led to the death of most of their animals. In some places, Tibetan peasant farmers, who knew only how to eat barley, which they roast over a fire and grind into a paste called *tsampa*, were now forced to grow unfamiliar and unsuitable grains. Much like the peasants in Ireland, who could not make bread from the wheat imported after the potato crop failed, the Tibetans, especially the nomads, had no idea how to eat wheat or maize. And, while many Chinese peasants knew from experience how to endure famine, this was a hardship virtually unknown among the Tibetans. Many said they would have died had Han Chinese immigrants not taught them to eat leaves or wild grasses.

The Khampas of eastern Tibet, now part of Sichuan province, grew barley and reared livestock, taking their animals in the summer to graze on high mountain pastures.<sup>3</sup> Like the Sichuanese peasants, in the 1950s the Khampas were coerced into joining mutual-aid teams, then higher co-operatives and finally communes. Their large monasteries became centres of resistance and when they were bombed, armed Khampas took to the hills to wage a guerrilla war. Those who stayed behind were forced into communes which were relatively small, with little more than a thousand members. Life was as harsh as elsewhere. Members had to hand over their entire possessions, including their spare clothes and quilts. Metal articles, including the large amounts of jewellery which Khampa women traditionally wear, were all melted down to make ‘steel’. Even in these distant mountains, steel furnaces were erected and, for the first time, Khampa women were made to plough the land. The new agricultural policies made no allowances for the high altitude and local conditions. So wheat was grown instead of barley and sometimes two or three crops were planted in a year, quickly exhausting the soil. The entire population was mobilized in winter, which is very severe in this region, to labour outdoors building unnecessary irrigation canals and digging redundant wells. The Khampas were also forced to eat in collective kitchens and these were retained until 1964, far longer than in other parts of China. One interviewee gave this description of her life in the Huo Shi Tang commune at the foot of the 22,000-foot-high Gongga mountains during this period.

*The worst years were from 1961 to 1963. Every day five or six people would be found dead in the morning. The bodies of the children and old people were always swollen with hunger. Since most men had been arrested, about 60 per cent of the adult population were women. We would collect grasses from the fields, boil them and force this mixture down our throats. If you didn't, then you would die. Although we were dizzy and faint, we still had to keep working and then we would try and pick up grain or grass to eat. But you had to keep an eye out for the guards. If they caught you, then they would grab you by the throat and choke you to make you spit out the grass seeds. They would body-search all of us when we returned from working in the fields. There were also special teams which searched people's homes for grain, digging up the floors, breaking open walls and looking through the fodder for the horses. The searches went on all through the famine. If they discovered any food, even a few grains, then they would organize a big meeting of 500 or 600 people. The guilty person would have a big wooden sign hung on him and then he would be paraded round, beaten and spat on. Some people were beaten to death in these struggle*

*sessions. Anyone accused of damaging the fields or tools was also beaten. The former landlords were beaten the worst and sent to work more often. Even if they were dying, they still had to work.*

An eyewitness from another commune in the same region described much the same situation: ‘The famine lasted from 1962 until 1965. My brothers went around picking up whatever food they could find. Sometimes they found bones, which might have been human, and ground them into a kind of paste, adding barley husks. We did not have *tsampa* but we ate this instead. We had to work very hard and were very hungry. Many people died at this time.’

As elsewhere in China, the authorities began seizing grain from the Khampas in early 1959. Those caught hoarding grain were sentenced to long prison terms as ‘rightists’. In prison, the majority starved to death. The inmates of one prison were fed a ration of just 11 lbs of grain a month.<sup>4</sup> Out of 300 inmates, 160 died. In another prison at Barkham, half of the 1,000 inmates perished.<sup>5</sup>

Another part of Sichuan, the Aba prefecture, had been detached from Qinghai after 1949. Here, the ‘democratic reforms’ started later and the monasteries were closed only in 1958. The worst year of famine was 1961. One monk recalled in an interview what it was like there:

*Everyone opposed what the Han cadres did, so there was a rebellion. Two-thirds of the men were arrested and were sent to labour camps, mostly at Guanxian near Chengdu. About 70 per cent died of hunger because they were fed only three ounces of food a day. A few returned in 1964 and others in 1977. Those who remained at home had to work from early in the morning until night. People were frightened to talk to each other, in case they were called counter-revolutionaries and beaten. Many people were beaten. No one could leave the commune. There was enough food but it was taken away by the Chinese. A few of us fled to the mountains and lived there for years.*

Ironically, this remote region of grasslands is where Mao and the Red Army would have perished on the Long March but for the food provided by the local Tibetans. ‘Some day we must pay the Mantsu [another tribe] and the Tibetans for the provisions we were obliged to take from them,’ Mao later told the American journalist Edgar Snow. According to Rewi Alley and Wilfred Burchett, two Maoists who worked in China after 1949, the formation of the communes in minority areas ‘was one way of repaying the debt’.<sup>6</sup>

For all the Tibetans in Sichuan, the famine lasted longer than among the Chinese because the reforms that followed the famine were delayed until 1965 when one yak and a small plot of land were distributed to households of three to five people. The overall death toll among the Khampas is thought to have been very high. One source said that in the Kanding district, out of one million inhabitants which included Han Chinese, 400,000 died. Another source estimated that a fifth of the Tibetans in Sichuan perished, largely from hunger.

The first Tibetans to rebel were the nomads in the region known by the Tibetans as Amdo. Most of Amdo lies in Qinghai province but a part, Gannan, is in Gansu and another, Aba, is in Sichuan. Among the nomads of Qinghai, the fiercest and most independent are known as the Goloks, or ‘heads turned backwards’, because they ignore even the authority of Lhasa. They began fighting as early as 1952 but their rebellion was eventually put down by the People’s Liberation Army who used planes to hunt them down. In many cases neither the pilots nor the troops on the ground could distinguish between a group of nomads on the move and a band of guerrilla fighters. They were also ignorant of Tibetan customs and mistook anyone carrying a knife or a sword, as Tibetans customarily do, for a dangerous rebel. And the women who carried infants inside their voluminous sheepskin coats were sometimes killed because soldiers suspected them of concealing weapons. In 1956, there were 140,000 Goloks, but by the 1964 census, their numbers had dropped to 70,000.<sup>7</sup> The Golok warriors escaped on horseback to the mountains or to India but the women and children remained and were forcibly settled into communes. In 1958, the tribe was brought together to live in a city of tents in Qinghai laid out in straight rows and traversed by streets named ‘Liberation Road’ or ‘Beijing Road’. Instead of roaming in small groups over the thin pasture, which grows on a bleak plateau 12,000 feet above sea level, the herds of each family, usually numbering around a hundred yaks, were concentrated in one spot. There was no forage prepared and what pasture there was was soon eaten bare. Before long the animals were starving. Normally, nomads slaughter animals in the autumn when they are fat to provide food for the winter. Now no animals could be killed without the express permission of the provincial authorities, hundreds of miles away, who made no allowance for the customs of the herdsmen. By early 1959, the animals had either died of starvation or were so thin that their emaciated bodies could provide little sustenance.

For the first time, the nomads also had to learn how to till the region’s stony soil. All over Amdo, efforts to plough the thin soil of the plateau failed, leaving a legacy of long-term environmental degradation. Overgrazing and deep ploughing destroyed the thin layer of top soil and exposed the barren black rock beneath. The ground was often so hard that the Tibetans had to use picks to break up the soil. Even so, they had to ‘deep plough’ to a depth of three feet and to ‘close plant’. The harvest of the autumn of 1959 failed, even in the arable regions where wheat and other crops unsuited to the short growing season were sown. On good farming land, yields fell by half. Without draught animals, women often had to pull the ploughs themselves. In the winter, when temperatures fall to minus 30° Centigrade or lower, they were turned out to dig irrigation canals. The poor harvests were reported as enormous successes. One interviewee, from a place called Xiahe, recalled how it happened:

*Grain production per mu was 250 gyama [330 lbs] but the Chinese officials reported that it was 1,000 gyama [1,320 lbs]. According to the Chinese, if in the past you could travel a few miles a day, now you could travel 300 miles a day. So likewise with the harvest: if you worked hard, it could be increased. If the leader of a particular hamlet gave a true figure, then, in another, they would give one 60 times or 600 times higher and the Chinese would say ‘Why can’t you produce this much?’ And then he would be struggled. So everybody told lies. At first an individual got eighteen ounces of food a day, but later, there was so little grain in the store that they reduced it to nine ounces. With this you cannot make steam buns, so they made a soup, a kind of gruel. Later, when they closed the collective kitchens, it was better. When people cooked their own food, they could supplement their diet with mushrooms, sweet potatoes and things gathered from the mountains and forests.*

Interviewees from Amdo also reported the endless house searches for grain, the seizure of all personal property and the smelting of all metal objects to make ‘steel’. Some also recalled eating food substitutes, known as *daishipin*. In winter people ate stalks, husks and cobs, and even boiled their boots and other articles made of leather. Several interviewees recalled incidents of cannibalism but these were generally among the Han Chinese. The death rate was extremely high in Amdo. One interviewee said that out of 906 inhabitants of his village in Tongren county, 20 fled and 267 died of hunger. A further 67 men were sent to the Delingha labour camp in Qinghai province, and only 24 ever returned. In all, one in three villagers died. The interviewee said that out of eight members in his house, four starved to death and two fled to India. Three uncles were also beaten to death in struggle sessions. Another interviewee from the same county said that in 1958 his village consisted of 35 households with 210 people. By 1964, only 127 people were left. Most of the men had been arrested and never returned.

Adult males died in the greatest numbers. Many were arrested simply because they were lamas. Generally a quarter of the male population were reckoned to be monks, although this includes those who were labourers attached to the monasteries which controlled much of the land and livestock. Amdo is famous as a religious centre of the dominant Gelugpa, or Yellow Hat, sect because its founder, Tsongkapa, as well as the current Dalai Lama

and the tenth Panchen Lama, were all born there. The demolition of nearly all the region's monasteries provoked widespread unrest. In several incidents, the People's Liberation Army machine-gunned crowds of Tibetans attempting to free lamas under arrest. In 1958, 2,000 rioting Tibetans were gunned down in such circumstances in Wendu county.<sup>8</sup> Almost every family contained one member who, as either a lama or a rebel, was classified as a 'black element'. This had terrible consequences for the rest of the population. Virtually everyone could be labelled as a 'rightist' because they had someone in their immediate family who had been killed as a rebel, arrested as a lama, or classified as a landlord for belonging to the local aristocracy. Some sources claim that during this period, one in seven Tibetans were penalized as 'rightists', compared to a national average of one in twenty.<sup>9</sup> Worse still, those arrested were sent to labour camps in Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan which had the lowest survival rates in the country. Few ever returned. For example, out of 400 monks arrested from a monastery in Gannan county, Gansu, only 100 survived.<sup>10</sup> Many eyewitnesses testified that the death rate for Tibetan prisoners ranged from 40 to 90 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

It was against this background that the tenth Panchen Lama drafted a 90,000-word report for Mao. Apart from Peng Dehuai, he is the only prominent leader known to have dared to do so during the famine.

In 1961, the Panchen Lama toured many counties in Amdo and was shocked by what he discovered. He went to his birthplace, Xunhua, as well as to Gonghe (also known as Hainan, where in 1958 the rebellion in Amdo began), Tongren, Guide, Haibei, Haixi and the labour camps at Gangca, to the north of Lake Koko Nor. At each place he asked how many had been shot, starved or beaten to death. According to another source, who refers to the report, the Panchen Lama concluded that up to 15 per cent of the population had been imprisoned, 800 to 1,000 from each town or village, and that in prison nearly half of these had died.<sup>12</sup>

At the Spring Festival in 1962, he returned to Qinghai, to a place near the Gangca labour camps. There he flew into a rage, angrily rounding on officials who had prepared a field for feasting, dancing and other New Year festivities. Had they no feelings, he asked, to dance on a spot beneath which the bodies of thousands of men, who had been starved or beaten to death, had recently been buried?

Chinese propaganda insists that after 1949 the Panchen Lama co-operated and supported the Chinese Communists, while the Dalai Lama turned traitor by fleeing the country in 1959. It is true that the Panchen Lama gave credence to Chinese propaganda reports that in Tibet a 'new socialist paradise on the roof of the world' had been created. In a report to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in December 1960, he declared that 'a wonderful situation prevails in Tibet today. Prosperous scenes of labour and production are to be found in every corner of the vast countryside and the towns. This is the main trend of our work today.' Yet what he saw on his journeys shook him deeply and he determined to write a hard-hitting report to Mao. Many of the various Tibetan advisers who surrounded him tried to dissuade him, but without success. They included Rinpoche Enju, his teacher and Abbot of the Tashilhunpo monastery, the seat of the Panchen Lamas. The latter had consulted oracles which predicted disaster but he also tried to put forward rational arguments to sway his pupil: 'If they [the Party leadership] had wanted to solve the problem, they would have done so earlier. If they do not want to solve the problem, then it will do no good just to send letters of opinion, because they will pay no attention. I worry that handing in this letter will not only not help the Tibetans, but will bring trouble to you. Now that the Dalai Lama has gone, everyone depends on you.'<sup>13</sup> Another of his advisers, the Abbot of Sera monastery and a Deputy Governor of Qinghai, Geshe Sherab Gyatso, urged the Panchen Lama to tone down the report and to 'make his words smoother'.

The Panchen ignored their counsel and in mid-1962 finished the report, adding four policy recommendations for Tibet. The report was written in Tibetan, translated into Chinese and then translated back again into Tibetan to make sure it contained no mistakes. Teams of interpreters worked on it, each only seeing a portion. In the report, the Panchen Lama alleged that Buddhism was being virtually annihilated and he warned that, if current policies continued, the Tibetan nationality would either cease to exist or be completely assimilated. The text of his report has never been published, but an official biography, *The Great Master Panchen*, contains this extract: 'In the last few years, the Tibetan population has fallen drastically. Apart from the women, children and the elderly who could not fight, the majority of the rest have all been arrested. All healthy, normal young men have been seized. The Tibetans living in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan lead an unspeakably difficult life.'<sup>14</sup> The report went on to charge the Communist Party with 'making serious mistakes in the suppression of the rebellion'.

After it was delivered, he met with Mao in person. Senior Chinese officials, including Premier Zhou Enlai, had from the beginning encouraged the Panchen Lama to write the report and the text had been approved in meetings with Li Wei-han and other senior officials from the United Front Department, the Party body responsible for Tibet. Their encouragement was part of the general rollback of Great Leap Forward policies which began in early 1961. That year the ultra-leftist Party secretaries of Qinghai and Gansu were toppled, and in other parts of the country such as Anhui, various forms of private farming were being tried out. Mao, however, was unrepentant. The Panchen Lama was being used in the continuing political struggle to overturn Mao's disastrous policies and when this failed, he became one of the first victims of the losing side. At a meeting at Beidaihe in late August 1962, Mao decisively turned against the 'reformers' and insisted on a return to Communism. The Panchen Lama was immediately arrested and charged with organizing a rebellion. Although he was struggled, he refused to make a self-criticism and remained under house arrest or in prison until 1977. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards accused him of being a 'reactionary slave-owner' and the 'biggest parasite and blood-sucker' in Tibet. For some years he was held in solitary confinement. He is later reported to have said that without Zhou Enlai's intervention, he would have been killed. Only in 1988 did the Party repeal the verdict that he was an 'anti-Party, anti-people, anti-socialism element'. In the early 1990s, his officially sanctioned biography was able to describe his report to Mao 'as the most glorious page in Master Panchen's political life'. When he returned to Qinghai for the first time in 1982, he was greeted by huge crowds.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1962, other Tibetans associated with the report also fell, including Li Wei-han, who was dismissed and accused of being a 'capitulator' for 'kowtowing' to the Panchen Lama. Many were arrested as 'little Panchens'. In 1968, during the Cultural Revolution, Geshe Sherab Gyatso was beaten to death by Red Guards at the age of 86. Rinpoche Enju, Abbot of the Tashilhunpo monastery, died in similar circumstances in 1969 aged 60. The Party Secretary of Qinghai, Gao Feng, also fell victim to the Cultural Revolution and died in 1968, after he had been dismissed and moved to a post in Jiangsu province.

The tragedy of the Tibetans does not end there. The Party drew no lessons from the tens of millions of famine deaths, and the Tibetans in the TAR, who had been exempted from establishing communes, later had to follow the same disastrous path. In the TAR, famine was endemic for twenty years.

After 1959, most of the peasants were forced to form mutual-aid teams and then co-operatives. Starvation soon set in. Dawa Norbu in *Red Star in Tibet* describes what happened:

*Immediately the harvest was over, the Chinese exaggerated the results as usual. They claimed that the yield was about ten times the seed... it followed that if we could produce a bumper crop in the first year of our liberation, there was no reason why we could not double this year's yield in the following season. We were made to sign a pledge to the effect that we would obtain a yield of twenty times the seed in the next*



As in the rest of China, the same ill-conceived irrigation schemes and the same insistence on using organic fertilizers and planting second and third crops were instituted. The fields were not rotated and were exhausted after the first year. Canals were built which proved useless because they relied on unpredictable glacial meltwater. Sometimes even existing water supplies were damaged by draining small pools and lakes. The Chinese introduced some successful innovations, among them steel instead of wooden ploughs, but most of the trumpeted achievements, such as the development of special 'high-altitude wheat' and other new varieties, were bogus. Grain output in the TAR temporarily rose in 1959 but then fell. A tough rationing regime began and Tibetans said they ate only a third of their normal diet. Dawa Norbu gives details: 'A working person was allotted a monthly ration of 22 lbs of *tsampa*, half a pound of oil or butter, a third of a brick of tea and a little salt. Only the tea was sufficient, the rest was a starvation diet to us. Old people and children received even less.'<sup>17</sup>

In the cities, people were given monthly ration tickets for 18 lbs of grain, as low as prison camp rations. In consequence, as one account describes, 'People ate cats, dogs, insects. Parents fed dying children their own blood mixed with hot water and *tsampa*. Other children were forced to leave home to beg on the roads. Old people went off to die in the hills alone. Thousands of Tibetans took to eating the refuse thrown by the Chinese to the pigs that each Han compound kept, while those around PLA outposts daily pried apart manure from the soldiers' horses, looking for undigested grain.'<sup>18</sup>

Anyone who admitted the existence of food shortages was violently punished and declared an 'enemy of socialism'. The Tibetans in the TAR had the additional burden of feeding a garrison of some 200,000 Chinese troops and another 100,000 civilians.<sup>19</sup> These were entitled to national grain tickets and access to state grain reserves. However, several Tibetan interviewees said that many Han Chinese also resorted to eating grass and leaves and had heads and legs swollen by oedema. As in other regions, the Tibetans saw their grain being taken away as 'national patriotic wealth' after every harvest. 'Some was taken away to China in trucks as "preparation for war". We were told that a war with Russia, or the USA, was imminent. Another part was left in Tibet to sell to the Chinese officials and their families,' said one interviewee. It is not certain, though, if this grain really was transported to China, or if it was held in granaries and tunnels for a war which never happened. Most of it probably just rotted away uneaten. Some Tibetans are convinced it was shipped to the Soviet Union to pay for help with the building of China's first nuclear bomb. It is certainly plausible to link the food shortages with an accelerated effort to build a nuclear bomb, as it was developed in Qinghai. Some Tibetan prisoners worked on the construction of China's nuclear research centre near Lake Koko Nor in Qinghai and others worked on the railways, roads and mines connected with this and Mao's other preparations for a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

Labour camps in the TAR had extraordinarily high death tolls. In Drapchi prison outside Lhasa, one survivor claimed that between November 1960 and June 1961 out of 17,000 prisoners, 14,000 died.<sup>20</sup> According to a joint statement by two nuns who fled to India in 1961, two-thirds of those in this prison died: 'Cartloads of dead bodies were taken away daily for burial or for use as manure on the fields. People were not allowed to say that those deaths were caused by starvation. If they were caught saying so they would be punished severely.'<sup>21</sup>

Among the rest of the population, most interviewees from the TAR reckoned that the death rate from famine in the years of the Great Leap Forward was around 10 per cent, although a few estimated a higher figure of 15 per cent. Yet more were to die of hunger later on. From the mid-1960s, the TAR authorities began to set up communes. The first was established in 1965 in Damzhung county. The Cultural Revolution delayed the spread of the communes but by around 1970 most nomads and peasants belonged to one. This was also the highpoint of the 'study Dazhai' campaign. The leader of the Dazhai model commune in Shanxi province, Chen Yonggui, toured Tibet as well as the rest of China. His commune became the model for the Tibetans, as one of the slogans of the time declared: 'For nomads, study Red Flag, for agriculture study Nyemo. The whole country should learn from Dazhai.'

Red Flag was the name of the model commune for Tibetan nomads in the Nagchu district, north-east of Lhasa. The Nyemo commune in Lhunthe county, about 280 miles north-west of Lhasa, was the model for Tibetan peasants, and its Party secretary, Rigzin Wangyal, was the Tibetan counterpart to Chen Yonggui. Tibetans had to imitate the large-scale terracing and irrigation techniques practised in Shanxi. There, the loess soil is soft and easy to terrace but the Tibetans had to slave for twelve hours a day trying to create terraces on the rocky slopes of towering mountains and then carry water up to irrigate the fields. The ill-fed peasants simply collapsed and died from exhaustion, or were beaten to death in struggle sessions for failing to meet their quotas. One source claimed that at the Nyemo commune, 30 per cent of the population died in these circumstances. It was sheer madness from the start. The terracing of mountains over 12,000 feet had already been tried during the Great Leap Forward in the Qilian mountains bordering Gansu. These and others built in Qinghai and elsewhere proved equally useless and have now been abandoned.

For the nomads in the TAR, the communes brought disaster just as they had for the Goloks ten years earlier. A former official from western Tibet described the folly of what took place:

*They were forced to start farming the high pastures. Old and young were yoked to the plough because their yaks were not domesticated and so could not be trained to plough a field. The nomads were also forced to build drystone walls, four or five feet high, to protect the grass and the fields from wild animals and the wind. Of course, they only lasted two or three days and then fell down. Because it was so high, 14,000 feet or more above sea level, they did not sow wheat but highland barley. However, even this could not grow at such altitudes. They planted 100 lbs per mu but gathered almost nothing at harvest time, perhaps a pound per mu. The officials had to do this otherwise they would be disregarding Mao's orders. The attempt at farming was only stopped in 1978 or 1979 and a lot of the pasture was ruined.*

In *New Tibet*, Doije Gashi claims that 'out of three or four years, there was only one year in which the Tibetans could say there was a barley harvest. In most cases, 80 per cent of the barley crop was destroyed by frost.'<sup>22</sup>

The collectivized yak herds died because the nomads were forbidden to move them to their summer or winter pastures. Soon there was no butter, milk or cheese. The authorities forbade, too, the hunting of wild animals, another standby of the nomads. As one source put it: 'We hardly saw meat because of the dialectical argument that ran thus: if you killed your animals that worked and reproduced, you were killing the national economy and you were committing anti-motherland sabotage.'<sup>23</sup> Every animal had to be registered and, before it was slaughtered, permission had first to be obtained from the prefecture's headquarters. 'The herds constantly declined, but officials had to report that they were increasing,' one former official recalled. Many nomads died not from hunger but from the tremendous cold. They no longer had yak hair to make tents with which to keep out the fierce winds. The Chinese also copied Soviet cross-breeding ideas, interbreeding the tough Tibetan mountain sheep with Ukrainian sheep. The crossbreeds were supposed to produce a heavier, coarser wool but the new sheep were not hardy enough to survive the winters.

The growing hunger and desperation of the peasantry led to a number of revolts in the countryside within the TAR. At a place called Nyima, about 50 miles north-west of Lhasa, a former nun called Ani Trinley Choedron led a revolt in 1969 which lasted for three or four months. Troops were sent in and reimposed control after heavy fighting. In Lhasa, the Party had the leaders of this revolt and others publicly executed. In one case, nine members of a group called the 'Gelo Zogha', or 'Association against the Rulers', were shot. In another case, a senior Party member, Ada Chongkok, was shot for,

amongst other crimes, writing a poem ridiculing the food shortages.<sup>24</sup>

No one can understand the continuing enmity between Tibetans and Chinese without grasping the bitterness created by these artificial famines. It is conceivable that in many places one in four Tibetans died of hunger although it may never be possible to arrive at a definitive statistic. No one is sure how many Tibetans there were before the famine, particularly since the national census did not extend to the TAR either in 1953 or in 1964. Official Chinese population statistics show a 10 per cent decline in the number of Tibetans between the 1953 and 1964 censuses. According to *Forty Years of Work on Nationalities*, published by the Nationalities Commission, the number of Tibetans fell from 2.78 to 2.5 million.<sup>25</sup> This is partly because up to 100,000 Tibetans fled to India after the abortive 1959 revolt but one must also remember that, as in the rest of China, the population may have grown after 1953. It is revealing that the same book shows that from 1953 to 1964, the number of ethnic Mongolians rose by 400,000 to 1.97 million, despite the famine. If the Tibetan population grew at a similar rate from 1953, it might have peaked at 3.4 million in 1959. Since by 1964 the population had decreased to 2.5 million, this suggests that some 900,000 are missing. If one subtracts the 100,000 refugees, then the rebellion and famine may have cost 800,000 lives. In his 1962 report the Panchen Lama talks of the population of Tibet numbering 3 million. This indicates that the population may have declined by 500,000 and that one in six may have perished.

Whatever the true figure, the evidence for the enormous scale of the famine and its long-term effects is considerable. Food supplies in Tibet only began to improve after 1980, when General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Wan Li, who introduced reforms in Anhui, visited Lhasa and replaced the Tibetan leadership. The communes began to be dismantled and a measure of religious freedom was restored, but fifteen years later Beijing admits that in a quarter of the TAR's counties people cannot feed or clothe themselves. A third of all children do not attend school and the literacy rate is the lowest in China at around 30 per cent. Despite the subsidies pumped into the TAR, put at 35 billion yuan between 1952 and 1994, the Tibetans are still among the poorest people in China. Long after the famine, life expectancy is still the lowest in China and scientists continue to debate how to restore the large areas of pasture ruined in this period. In 1995, the Chinese government estimated that it would take twenty-five years for Tibet to catch up with the rest of the country.<sup>26</sup>



## In the Prison Camps

‘The Buddhist classics speak of six ways one can be reincarnated. There is hell, hungry ghosts, animals, Asura, humans and heaven, and the worst of these is to become a hungry ghost.’ Zhang Xianliang, *Grass Soup*

Millions were sucked into China’s vast network of prisons and labour colonies during the Great Leap Forward, indeed more than in any other period after 1949. And, with the onset of the famine, these institutions became in effect death camps.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Harry Wu, who himself spent nineteen years in the camps, estimates that during this period the number of political prisoners peaked at close to 10 million. (By comparison, in the forty years up to 1989, he estimates that a total of 30—40 million were arrested and convicted for political reasons.<sup>2</sup>)

*During the Three Red Banners movement that began in 1958, anyone who expressed dissatisfaction with the hardships caused by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party leader’s impractical policies, or anyone who showed resentment over the following three years of hunger and food shortages, was seen as directly threatening the stability of the Communist Party’s dictatorship. The Communist Party responded with draconian measures of suppression.*

The majority, around 70 per cent, of those imprisoned were sentenced to ‘reform through labour’ and held in the labour reform camps of the Ministry of Public Security. Such prisons contain both common and political criminals. As in the Soviet Gulag, intellectuals and political prisoners were treated more harshly in these labour camps than real criminals, who were considered easier to reform and indoctrinate. Harry Wu claims that political prisoners were given longer sentences, reprimanded and beaten more often and given lower food rations. They also found it harder to adapt to the treacherous dog-eat-dog environment in the camps and were not able to cope with the physical demands made on them which, in turn, led to punishments for failing to meet their work quotas and still lower rations.

In exceptional cases, life could be better for intellectuals. One interviewee from Guangzhou said both her parents were sent to labour camps during the famine. Her father never returned, dying in a camp in 1975, but her mother was sent to the Yingde labour farm in Guangdong province which grows tea. As a professional player of the *erhu*, a Chinese musical instrument, she was invited to join a prison orchestra which toured other camps. She was given four meals a day and ate better than did her children left behind in Guangzhou. Gao Ertai, a painter, only survived the camps because he was summoned by the Gansu Party Secretary, Zhang Zhongliang, to paint a tableau celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Daqing oilfield. At that stage, his legs were so swollen by oedema that he had to be lifted up on to the scaffolding to complete the huge tableau.<sup>3</sup>

However, most of those arrested were not intellectuals but rather, as Harry Wu points out, ‘peasants driven to drastic acts or rebellion by hunger and dissatisfaction with living conditions’. The severity of these peasants’ punishments was linked to their class status:

*Suppose someone steals twenty pecks of corn from a commune. If this person is from a landlord family, it is possible his sentence could be as high as ten years, the rationale being ‘his act should be considered a counter-attack by the landlord class, a hostile and destructive counter-revolutionary act against socialist public property’. If this person is from a poor or middle-class peasant background, or from the family of a Party cadre, it is possible that no disciplinary action would be taken.*

Most of the peasants, however, were not transported to distant labour reform camps. During the Great Leap Forward, the Party created another form of imprisonment called ‘re-education through labour’. This was not organized by the Ministry of Public Security but by provincial, municipal and county-level authorities. Wu writes that from 1958, such makeshift re-education-through-labour camps were set up at every level down to that of the local village commune. The inmates were not subject to any judicial procedure and were not imprisoned for a fixed term but conditions were otherwise usually identical to those in the labour camps. Arrests under the ‘re-education through labour’ system began in 1957, when perhaps 550,000 counter-revolutionary rightists and another 400,000 rightist sympathizers were dispatched to the camps. The system became fully effective the following year and, according to Wu, was ‘undoubtedly one of the most important methods the Communist regime employed to weather the storm’. Inevitably, there are no comprehensive records of the fate of these re-education-through-labour prisoners but a Party document from Fengyang, Anhui, gives some idea of their circumstances:

*Peasants were forced to work extra hours at the construction site of the hydro-electric power station. The cadres, including the county Party Secretary and deputy magistrate, treated the peasants harshly. If the peasants did not work, they were not given food. Some sick peasants were sent back home and died on the way... In the construction site of the reservoir, a prison was set up where 70 peasants were imprisoned of whom 28 died. There were many methods of torture, including being forced to stand, being tied up by ropes, or suspended by ropes. One of the worst methods was to thread iron wire through people’s ears.<sup>4</sup>*

Since there are so few other accounts of ‘re-education through labour’ from the rest of China, one cannot be certain how representative this example is. Much more, though, is known about life in the labour reform camps. Many of these camps were established in remote and uninhabited regions in Heilongjiang, Gansu and Qinghai, and a handful of surviving inmates who later emigrated have written about their horrifying experiences there. The death rate in these camps was staggeringly high, ranging from an average rate of 20 per cent to places in which only one in ten survived. The painter Gao Ertai was arrested as a rightist in 1957 and found himself in such a camp with 3,000 others at the Jiabiangou state farm near Jiuquan in Gansu: ‘More than 90 per cent of us perished. For 15 hours a day, we dug a gully in a futile bid to render the wasteland fertile. We were given two bowls of thin gruel every day in addition to an insubstantial bun... Years later, when local peasants wanted to convert the site into a seed farm, they discovered hundreds upon hundreds of bodies.’<sup>5</sup>

The highest death rate was probably experienced by the Tibetans imprisoned after the abortive revolt of 1959. One survivor, Ama Adhe, describes in *A Strange Liberation: Tibetan Lives in Chinese Hands* what happened at the Dartsedo camp bordering Sichuan. By the roadside the authorities opened a mass grave which was filled with corpses and gave off a terrible stench. ‘Every day,’ she recalls, ‘they would deliver nine or ten truck loads of bodies to put there. Some days less, some days more. Usually, eight, nine, ten trucks.’ Of the 300 women arrested with her, only 100 survived. The survivors were then made to walk to another prison, a gigantic lead mine, which was still worse. This camp, called Gothang Gyalpo, was filled with Tibetans and Kuomintang prisoners: ‘So many prisoners were working all over this huge lead mine, they looked like bugs, like ants going in every direction. There were thousands and thousands of them swarming over the mine. And, when I looked round, they were all Tibetan. And their physical



condition was the same as at Dartsedo, starvation. Many were leaning on walking sticks, otherwise they would not be able to hold up their heads.’ Only 4 out of the 100 she arrived with survived this second camp. In 1962, a fellow prisoner overheard a new prison warder being told that in the last three years, 12,019 Tibetans had starved to death at the mine.

John Avedon, in his book on the Tibetans, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, quotes former prisoners who reported similar death rates in Gansu. One claimed that of the 70,000 Tibetans taken to camps north of the provincial capital, Lanzhou, only half survived. At Jiuzhen prison in the same province, more than half the 76 Tibetan prisoners died of starvation and at least half of the 1,000 Chinese inmates perished. At the Vebou camp complex, ten hours’ drive west of Xining, the capital of Qinghai, 14,000 of the 30,000 inmates died. In another camp at Shen Mu, half the 12,000 inmates died.<sup>6</sup>

One interviewee from Shanghai told me that at the Mazong Shan coal-mine in Gansu province where he was sent, only 2,000 of the 5,000 Shanghainese he arrived with survived. Altogether there were 100,000 prisoners, half of them Tibetans, and at least 20 per cent died of hunger. Another interviewee estimated that one in five died at the Qi Ling state farm in Qinghai province where he worked with 4,000 others. Han Weitian, who was arrested in Shanghai as a former Kuomintang member and whose experiences are recorded by the Taiwanese-based writer Pu Ning in *Red in Tooth and Claw*, was sent to the Delingha labour camp complex in the same province. Han believes one-fifth of the 100,000 inmates died and that in all the camps in Qinghai 200,000 died.

Such specific figures are not available for those sent either to camps in the far north or, nearer home, to places such as Qinghe in Hebei province. The accounts of former inmates are no less terrible, though. Jean Pasqualini, part French, part Chinese and the author of *Prisoner of Mao*, relates how since so many prisoners were dying, the guards took the weakest to a special camp known as Section 585 or the Patient Recovery Centre to improve the morale of the rest. Harry Wu was one of the few ever to return from Section 585. In his autobiography *Bitter Winds*, he remembers that ‘dead bodies went out and live bodies came in almost daily’. Chi Chunguang, now a professor of English in America, was also there: ‘When people were dying in their hundreds, the bodies were carried from all over the state farm to one camp. They stacked all the corpses in three rooms and piled them up to the ceiling. Then, in the evening, convicts were ordered to take out the corpses and bury them.’<sup>7</sup>

Peasants living outside the camps somehow became convinced that those inside had greater access to food. A former journalist from Shaanxi, sent to a state farm in the Qilian mountains on the border of Gansu and Qinghai, remembers how peasants even came to beg to be allowed to work in the camp, settling in caves outside and trying to steal the prisoners’ food.<sup>8</sup> Dr Tensing Choedak, the Dalai Lama’s physician, has said that at his camp in Gansu he gave food to a starving village girl. Next day there was ‘a mass assault on the prison walls by scores of men and women from Jiuzhen camp demanding food. A full-scale mêlée ensued, until they were beaten back with rifle butts by the guards and then the townspeople retreated across the fields.’<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the Chinese writer Zhang Xianliang, in his autobiographical work *Grass Soup*, writes that he escaped from his camp in Ningxia province only to discover that the villagers outside had less to wear and eat than the prisoners themselves.

Before the famine, rations in the labour reform camps were not designed to starve the prisoners. In the autumn of 1958, prisoners in some camps even shared with the peasants the joy of being able to eat as much as they wanted. This happy state lasted for several months. Most Chinese prisoners are fed *wotou*, buns made of baked and steamed corn. When Jean Pasqualini first arrived in the camps, the minimum monthly grain ration was 31 lbs, but top workers could get 43 lbs. He was required to spend his days folding sheets of paper in his prison cell and the more he worked, the more he ate. The prisoners were classified into categories according to their work rate, and every few weeks their status and rations would be reassessed. The amount of food was determined not just by productivity but by a prisoner’s political attitude. Political prisoners almost never received the top rations.

Dr Benjamin Lee, who now works in the United States but was then a prisoner in the Lake Xingkai camps in the far north, says that inmates there had a monthly ration of 83.7 lbs of cereals and over an ounce of soybean oil.<sup>10</sup> This diet of 2.7 lbs a day provided over 4,000 calories but, after deducting food stolen or wasted, the ration in fact amounted to only 2.2 lbs, or 3,520 calories a day. This is the barest minimum needed to sustain life in the region’s harsh environment where in winter temperatures fall to minus 20° Centigrade and sometimes even lower. In this cold, prisoners dug canals for twelve to sixteen hours a day. A pair of prisoners would together have to carry loads of 330-440 lbs of muddy earth on shoulder poles, up and down steep and slippery banks, hundreds of times each day. This was devastating for intellectuals unused to the mildest form of physical labour.

Generally, prisoners in the labour reform camps began to die in large numbers at the end of 1960, when grain rations were cut by half and adulterated with ‘food substitutes’. These *daishipin* consisted of wild grasses, the otherwise inedible byproducts of crops, such as corncobs, chaff and potato leaves, and the residue of pressed oil seeds, as well as innovations such as algae and seaweed. To make the food go further, the buns were also steamed twice, making them heavy with water. In some places, prison rations were cut a year earlier. Zhang Xianliang, imprisoned in Ningxia, writes that in the winter of 1959-60, the grain ration dropped from 22 lbs a month to 16.5 lbs, amounting to a couple of buns a day. Eventually, prisoners were getting a mere 9.9 lbs a month. Even this was not pure food, but unhusked grain. Injiuzhen camp in Gansu, the ration dropped still lower, first to 16.5 lbs a month and then to 8.5 lbs, or just 1.5 oz per meal.

As food supplies dwindled in the winter of 1959-60, camp commandants, like commune leaders in the countryside, decreed that only those who worked would be fed. On the Qinghe state farm in Hebei, prisoners considered beyond work – the elderly, the weak and the sick – were brought to the special unit described above by Jean Pasqualini and left to die. The working hours of the rest were shortened so that they could preserve their energy for the vital sowing season in the spring. When spring came, prisoners who were sent out into the fields often died from the extreme demands made of them. Han Weitian recalls how in Qinghai he saw ‘healthy’ prisoners carrying bags of seed weighing 60 lbs and dropping down dead with exhaustion from the effort of running behind the sowing machine. In Hebei province, prisoners died in a similar fashion in the spring of 1962 when hundreds of the healthiest had to answer Mao’s call for an all-out effort on sowing.

From early 1961, the labour reform camp authorities changed the rules and began to allow inmates’ relatives to send or deliver food parcels. Prisoners were even encouraged to write home and ask for food, and to go out scavenging. Much of what they gathered consisted of wild grasses, bark and tree leaves which ended up as soup. And in their struggle to survive, prisoners began to eat far worse things. They hunted living creatures: field-mice, rats, frogs, toads, snakes, lizards, cockroaches, the eggs of praying mantises and worms of all kinds. These things were caught, taken back to the camp and boiled. Some creatures, such as snakes, they ate raw. Others searched through horse and ox dung for worms and pieces of undigested grain which could be cleaned and eaten. Prisoners also ate the worms from their own stools and, at Delingha, searched through the excrement of other prisoners for undigested grains. This was because those prisoners who were former Party members were given the best jobs which allowed them to pilfer grain from the camp granary; the uncooked grain passed through them undigested. In some camps, prisoners were seen eating their own excrement. Inmates also searched the refuse of the guards for pieces of old cabbage, the rind of fruit, rotten meat and bones. Ama Adhe recalls how the guards would watch, laughing, as prisoners fought over used tea leaves that they had thrown on the ground.

More appalling than any of this was cannibalism. Eyewitness reports of cannibalism appear in all accounts of prison life during this period. In one camp in Gansu, it was called ‘eating the crops of Jiuzhen’. A Tibetan who was in Jiuzhen, Tenpa Soepa, describes how he tried, but failed, to eat one of

his companions: ‘I couldn’t even get a piece off the body. First of all, I was very weak, and the corpse was stiff and frozen. We didn’t have any knives. I tried to pull off an ear but couldn’t. You just had to put your mouth down and try to bite a piece off. But when I was about to bite, in my mind I felt this strong feeling. I felt I could not possibly eat this. I tried twice but in the end I was not able to eat anything.’<sup>11</sup>

The most terrible story appears in *Red in Tooth and Claw*. In the Delingha camp, prisoners sent out to fetch water would dig up fresh corpses buried beneath a thin layer of sandy soil. They would then cut the flesh off the thighs, arms or breast to sell as meat from a horse or camel: the buyer, though suspecting the meat’s true origin, would not inquire too closely.

There was also a lively trade in tobacco, clothes and food pilfered from the kitchens or caught in the fields. While some prisoners arrived in camps without winter clothing, or even bowls and eating implements, others, especially the city-dwellers, came with watches that were exchanged for food. A few traders had wads of money tied around their waists when they died. For the majority, the obsession with food was so all-encompassing that some hesitated to eat all their food at once. Psychologically, it was better to keep some food in reserve rather than endure the torture of watching others eat or live with the knowledge that there was nothing more left to eat. Professor Chi Chunghuang saw the most poignant example in Qinghe. He was lying in the infirmary next to a young college student from Sichuan who had oedema and was plainly close to death. His mother had sent him a box with cake inside but he would not eat it. Instead, he just opened the box and looked at it while his neighbours watched with envy. He died a few days later with the cake still uneaten. Professor Chi states: ‘One has to understand the psychology of hunger. Every evening we would sit on the *kang* for supper. No one would eat first because then they would finish first and have to watch the others eat. This was a great suffering. When hungry you hate to eat so fast because afterwards there is nothing left.’

In some camps, prisoners sewed themselves little bags in which to keep food. They would then hang these around their necks just to keep this fear at bay. Perpetual hunger led to another obsession over the division of rations. This was difficult to do fairly. Prisoners did not have receptacles of equal size. Some got the watery food from the top of the pail, others the thicker gruel from the bottom. Certain types of food, such as a pile of cucumbers of different sizes, simply could not be divided into identical portions. In Dr Choedak’s camp, some prisoners had no bowls but only pieces of wood in which crude indentations had been carved. Others had tin cans or metal ashtrays which the guards had handed out.<sup>12</sup> Zhang Xianliang in *Grass Soup* records:

*Among the 18 men there were eighteen different standards of measurement. Splitting up a pile of food was infinitely more difficult than writing a poem... Whether or not a man kept on living, or whether he was able to live one more day or two, appeared to depend on whether he was given two extra or two fewer grains of rice. One’s survival did not depend on the vitamins or protein in one or two grains of rice – but it did depend on the spiritual sustenance, the encouragement those grains gave a man. After every convict had received his portion, he would stir it around his basin for a long time, glancing at everybody else’s basins and comparing their amounts to his own.*

Suspicion and envy led to fights and thieving on all sides. Prisoners stole from each other to find things to trade for food. The strong bullied the weak to get the best food. As the rations were cut, the prison camps became less and less controllable. Groups of prisoners began to attack the food being carted to other cells, or to grab the food of another before it was eaten. Harry Wu describes how he organized his squad to protect their supplies:

*I told my squad we would walk back from the kitchen together to protect each other’s food. Even then, our rations were at risk. Three men came after one of my squad members the next afternoon and two of them grabbed him while the other stole his wotou. They had organised to work together. Then other squads including mine began organising against the band of three. I went out with four of my squad members the following day. We found the three and gave them a beating.’<sup>13</sup>*

In Delingha, Qinghai, conditions were still worse, as Han Weitian records in *Red in Tooth and Claw*.

*On our farm, many stronger fellows gathered there to rob the food senders. It is hard to believe that men on the brink of death could still be so energetic, but they struggled out of their beds, staggered up to the kitchen door, and lay in ambush waiting for the moment when the bamboo hampers of loaves were carried out of the kitchen. They were all prepared to steal. One day these starving plunderers snatched the loaves away, and afterwards many suspects were imprisoned in special cells, and kept constantly in close custody until they died. Strife was inevitable among these men. Three to five people died every day fighting one another for food at the kitchen door, or in the yard. They did not fight with clubs or fists, but merely pushed each other with their remaining strength. That push was often enough to knock down one’s opponent and deprive him of his life.*

As the conviction grew among the prisoners that they were all doomed to die in the camps, they grew fearless with desperation. Order began to collapse throughout the prison system and guards feared a mutiny. In August 1961, the Minister of Public Security, Luo Ruiqing, authorized all labour reform camps to ‘use strong management to prevent vicious and malignant incidents involving prisoner uprisings’.<sup>14</sup>

Punishments became more brutal. In Ningxia, prisoners were tied to a carrying pole and suspended upside down, or bound to a tree to allow clouds of mosquitoes to feast on them. Another punishment was to tie a man’s hands together and let other convicts drag him along the ground.<sup>15</sup> In Jiuzhen, Gansu, there were frequent executions. Dr Choedak remembers that ‘with hundreds dead, executions continued to be carried out. The charges were never specified. The names of those to be shot would simply appear on small posters periodically glued to the prison walls with such observations as “stubborn” or “suffers from old brains”’.<sup>16</sup>

Yet at the height of the famine in Ningxia, the guards made no effort to stop the prisoners from escaping. The prison walls were only four feet high, but there was little point in escaping when there was even less to eat outside. In *Bitter Winds* Harry Wu writes that in Hebei’s Qinghe camp one prisoner who did escape found that even in Beijing there was nothing to eat so he walked up to a police kiosk, turned himself in and was sent back to the same prison.

The brutal nature of the prison system may have encouraged prisoners to beat each other in struggle sessions, but this did not always prevent them from showing humanity towards one another. The Tibetans, in particular, reported how older prisoners would give younger ones their food if they thought that they themselves had no chance of surviving. Ama Adhe stole food and tossed it into the cells of starving lamas, and when a relative brought her food, she divided it up amongst her fellow prisoners. Yet, in general, such gestures were rare. The struggle to survive overrode all normal feelings. Prisoners noticed how the dehumanizing effect of hunger extended even towards their wives and children for whom they lost all concern. Spouses who travelled long distances to bring gifts of food, even though they had deprived themselves of their meagre rations to do so, inspired little gratitude. Some prisoners committed suicide when they became aware of the dehumanized state into which they had fallen.

The behaviour of the guards in the labour reform camps is rarely described as intentionally cruel. It was merely that they did not care whether the prisoners lived or died. One exception is mentioned by Ama Adhe who remembers the well-fed guards of the Gothang Gyalpo lead mine taking a

deliberate delight in mocking their prisoners:

*When prison staff saw the cook carrying the soup to the prisoners, they gathered together and followed along behind the cook to watch the scene for their amusement. When all the soup was served out, the empty pot would be placed in the centre of the prisoners. The prisoners would watch the pot and wait, and the guards and officials would stand around and watch with glee. Then, on a signal, the prisoners would go all out for the pot, desperately trying to get something out of it, sticking their hands in and licking their fingers. As the prisoners were so weak they would fall over and stumble and roll around, and the pot would be pushed and pulled in every direction and the prisoners would be fighting together for a chance to lick this empty pot. The Chinese officers would roar with laughter, it was a very funny show for them, and they would shout and laugh and encourage the prisoners to fight over the empty pot.<sup>17</sup>*

As long as Mao denied the existence of the famine, the guards had no choice but to continue working the prisoners to death. After all, since there was no famine, prisoners could not be dying of hunger. Once a prisoner failed to fulfil his work quota, he was given less food, or none at all. With less food it was harder to continue working and death almost inevitably followed. Dr Choedak saw guards kicking prisoners who were dying, cursing them for being ‘too lazy to work’. Tenpa Soepa recalls that ‘When a prisoner became ill or exhausted he would just lie under his blanket in the morning. Then the guards would drag him out to the fields, right out to his work place. But these prisoners couldn’t do any work, they couldn’t even stand up. They would just lie there in the field, and there they would die. Many died just like that, lying helpless in the fields.’

Han Weitian reports that the same thing happened in Delingha: ‘Sometimes when a poor wretch fell dead on the ground, the “leaders” would go over and examine him to determine whether he had really ceased to breathe, but they wouldn’t allow death to provide an excuse for malingering.’

The absolute insistence that there was no famine when all around were dying was not merely macabre, it was surreal. Zhang Xianliang recalls that it was a political crime to note how many were dying:

*People in our group began to die one after another. If you got up in the morning and discovered that the person beside you had died, the thing to do was make a report to the Group Leader in the following manner: ‘Group Leader, so-and-so has died.’ Whatever happened, you never wanted to say ‘Oh! Group Leader, another person has died!’ This subtle linguistic difference is something that people who were not in the camps in the 1960s cannot understand... You had to forget all about the man who had died beside you right away. Next time, when ‘another’ died, you had to think of him as the first. It was necessary to get accustomed to this method of accounting, for no matter how many died in the camps, they were all the only one who died.*

The prison authorities made every effort to carry on as if nothing was amiss. In Qinghe the camp loudspeakers continued to blare out waltzes and tunes such as ‘The asters are in bloom’ while the emaciated prisoners staggered across the bleak fields in search of food. Political indoctrination, with lectures, study sessions in the cells, the compilation of lengthy self-criticisms and even the occasional performance of an agitprop play, went on without respite. One interviewee remembers how in his camp throughout the famine the gaunt skeletons had to assemble each day and stand with heads bowed to listen to a speech about ideology: ‘This was the thought reform, the re-education of the camps, which was supposed to turn us into New Men to fit into the New Society.’

In May 1961 the Chinese government imposed a new policy, establishing fixed sentences for counter-revolutionary rightists undergoing re-education through labour. In study sessions Harry Wu and other rightists were told to make a confession, think again about their crimes, and state the punishment they thought they deserved. At study sessions Dr Choedak had to repeat that ‘the Chinese Communists are the vanguard of all Communists. This is because Mao is the leader of the whole world. Right now he is the only one worthy of even being called a leader!’ In Qinghe in 1960, Jean Pasqualini heard the camp director tell them that ‘The situation at home and abroad is very good. At home the production has never been so high and all efforts are being bent to overcome any economic hardships that linger on. Improvement is assured for 1961. What I have come to tell you is that you have more reason than ever to be grateful to the government. The government realises we have been living through a temporary period of difficulty caused by abnormal factors beyond our control.’

Prisoners were warned not to tell visitors that there was famine or that inmates were dying from starvation. When the brother of Ama Adhe arrived to meet her in one camp, she was warned that she must ‘show a happy face’. If she said anything about starvation or suffering there would be ‘serious consequences’. Like officials elsewhere in China, the prison authorities dared not speak out or betray what they thought. For a while, the guards were able to insulate themselves from the famine by consuming the prisoners’ rations or what they grew. However, their wives and children, who often remained in the big cities, starved on the same diminishing rations as the rest of the population. Eventually, the food shortage did affect the prison guards. In the Qinghe camp prisoners were invited to tour the kitchens of the guards to see what they were eating – sweet potato flour mixed with ersatz corncob. A Shanghainese sent to work at the Mazong Shan coal-mine in the deserts of Gansu recalls how his starving guards repeatedly sent out desperate messages to the provincial government headquarters begging for food. When there was no reply, a party set off to walk to the railway line. From there, they used a hand-operated railway cart to travel hundreds of miles to the provincial capital of Lanzhou. In response to their appeal, the Lanzhou authorities sent a truck which arrived one day containing 5 tonnes of grain. The guards kept half and gave the rest to the prisoners, who each received half a cup of grain.<sup>18</sup>

If the Great Leap Forward had not been abandoned, it is likely that in this camp and others many more inmates would have died. Thanks to Liu Shaoqi’s emergency measures, which will be discussed in [Chapter 16](#), conditions began to improve at the end of 1961 and were still better in 1962. And in 1961, when the Party secretaries of Qinghai and Gansu were replaced, some prisoners began to be sent home. Even Tibetan prisoners held in Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai were re-housed in prisons in Tibet. Elsewhere, the change was less marked. In Qinghe near Beijing food rations increased slightly in late 1961 and the amount of food substitutes fell. In 1962, Liu Shaoqi made preparations to rehabilitate the rightists and allow them to return to their old jobs. Although Mao blocked this move, the commandants of many camps were replaced and a more humane regime was introduced. Some prisoners even began to be paid for their labour.



## The Anatomy of Hunger

‘In those years, starvation became a sort of mental manacle, depriving us of our freedom to think.’ Han Weitian

Starvation can be one of the most prolonged and humiliating forms of death. Its immediate effect is rapid weight loss as the body consumes reserves of fat and then muscle tissue. On a diet of 1,600 calories a day, equivalent to a pound of cereals, the body will lose a quarter of its weight in two to three months.<sup>1</sup> This, the first stage of starvation, is familiar from news pictures. Adults often have emaciated bodies and concave stomachs while the bellies of children are distended by the gases created by bacteria growing in the stomach and intestine. In tropical countries and especially among refugees living in camps, famine victims in this state are often carried away by disease before they reach the stage of terminal starvation.

However, in China the famine was different. The vast majority of people remained in their own homes. Standards of public health continued to be vigorously enforced. Even in the depths of the famine, people in villages or labour camps were inspected to see if they were obeying the sanitation regulations zealously laid down during the Great Leap Forward.

As the famine intensified, a large part of the population reached the second stage of starvation. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes it thus: ‘Activity will be reduced and general lethargy will occur. If there is a further reduction in food intake, further weight loss will occur and the death rate will rise. Psychologically the mind is dominated by a desire for food. Other emotions are dulled. Moral standards are lowered and in extreme conditions murder and cannibalism may occur.’

In this second stage, the body stops shrinking and begins to swell. In medieval Europe, this was called the ‘dropsy’. It is now known as oedema (or edema), defined in the *Encyclopaedia* as ‘a swelling due to the effusion of watery fluid into the intercellular spaces of connective tissues’. A lack of protein means that fluid escapes from the blood into the tissues which, when punctured, ‘secrete a thin incoagulable fluid’.

During the height of the famine, various sources suggest that around 10 per cent of the urban population and 10 to 30 per cent of the rural population suffered from oedema. In Fengyang, a report claimed that 37.8 per cent of the population was sick, largely from oedema.<sup>2</sup> It is a condition easily detected. It is present if, when a finger is pressed against the skin, the skin preserves the indentation rather than reverting to its unmarked state. In Changsha, Hunan province, one writer recalls that ‘Many of the old people and almost all the children I knew had the “water swelling disease”, dropsy. Our bodies puffed up and wouldn’t recede... When acquaintances met, they squeezed each other’s legs to see how swollen they were, and examined each other’s skin to see if they were yellow. It was a game for me to poke Nai Nai’s cheek and leave a hole that would fill up only very slowly like dough.’<sup>3</sup> Even in Beijing, which as the capital received the highest priority in the supply of food, oedema was present. One doctor who worked there reckoned that it affected 10 per cent of the population. A health survey conducted in 1961 estimated that the same proportion of Heilongjiang’s population likewise had oedema.<sup>4</sup>

Since officially there was no famine in China, only bumper harvests, doctors were forbidden to tell patients that they were starving. The usual Chinese terms for malnutrition and lack of food are *yinyang bu Hang* and *quefa yinyang*. Instead, the government resorted to euphemisms. Doctors were told to talk about fictitious diseases such as *fuzhong bing* or *shuizhong bing*, that is swollen sickness or water illness. Oedema is, however, a symptom not a disease. At the same time, it was forbidden to record a death as due to starvation. Even in the prison camps this could not be done, and in some places all medical terms were dispensed with and oedema was simply referred to as ‘Number Two Disease’.

Emmanuel John Hevi, an African student studying medicine in Beijing during the famine, records how his teachers claimed that the Chinese are physiologically different from the rest of humanity. His American-trained biology professor gave a lecture on the metabolism and explained that ‘because proteins, fats and carbohydrates are inter-convertible during human metabolic processes, the people of China do not suffer any nutritional loss in consequence of their diet’s deficiency in fats and proteins’. As Hevi comments, ‘She was not telling us what she knew to be a fact but rather what she had been ordered to tell us as a political necessity... Faced with a shortage of protein and fats, the Party declares that these things are no longer necessary but are luxuries which the Chinese people can well do without.’<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, one authoritative medical description of the reality behind such nonsense has been written by Dr Benjamin Lee who now works in the Department of Pediatrics at the Louisiana State University Medical Center.<sup>6</sup> In 1958 he was sentenced as a rightist and spent the next four years on the Sino-Russian border in Heilongjiang province at the Lake Xingkai state farm. There he took notes of the effects of the famine on over 5,000 prisoners. Although Dr Lee only recorded what happened to camp inmates, his description applies equally well to millions of others outside the camps:

*An inmate would become malnourished within a few weeks of arrival. Usually, the first sign of severe malnutrition in a prisoner was incontinence. However little water he had drunk, the victim would find himself having to urinate one or even two pints of colourless fluid a night. Prisoners had to get up at one-to three-hour intervals and, even more humiliating in crowded cells, they would often pee in their pants before they made it to a pot or the latrines. Some gripped their penis to try and stop themselves.*

Equally degrading was the way in which the starving lost control over their bowels, developing acute diarrhoea. Their stools would become milky and jelly-like, and often bloody. Terminal cases excreted reddish brown watery faeces in large quantities. Food would pass through the intestine within an hour, often without undergoing any change. Victims would also suffer from severe flatulence and at night they would sweat so severely that their bedclothes would become drenched.

*The outside of the body would also change. In a third of the inmates, big patches of brown skin appeared, especially at the elbows, the spine, the feet and thighs. Some long-term prisoners found the skin inside their cheeks drying up and turning green. The skin would also fissure, creating crevasses in the hands and feet which became infected. The skin became particularly painful at the fingertips and the sides of the nails. Often the first sign of malnutrition was the appearance of fine parallel yellowish lines which appeared on the fingernails. The upper nail would flatten out and become thin and brittle, while the lower part turned thick and soft like dirty rubber. Sometimes the nails bled, causing intolerable pain. As they weakened, prisoners found that they could no longer make fine movements with their fingers and the tendons around the wrists became inflamed.*

Starvation also changed the body in other ways. Large joints, like the shoulder, moved with a dull clanging noise. Joints thickened and became enlarged. Even the cartilage at the end of the nose thickened so that the bridge of the nose widened into a crest. Much the same thing happened to the

sternum. Other parts also swelled in strange ways. In some prisoners, the parotid glands under the neck and in front of the ears grew to the size of a hamburger. Others complained of swellings behind the knees, or at lymph nodes in the groin or under the arms. Veins in the eyeballs hardened and became inflamed. Fissures in the teeth appeared. In some cases, the chest collapsed and became compressed like a child's rib-cage to half or even a third of its normal extent.

Most inmates suffered from a terrible hacking cough. One former inmate said that this condition became worse at night when he would cough continuously, unable to catch his breath: 'My chest cavity seemed to have been packed with dynamite – explosion after explosion would erupt from within me.' Many famine victims also fell into a high fever with severe headaches and cramps. High blood pressure, hypertension and bradycardia, when the heart beats very slowly, became common, while broken bones did not heal but swelled up dangerously.

Dr Lee could always tell when a prisoner was going to die. He would lose his appetite, the skin around his swollen body would turn translucent and his face would become corpse-like. However, the actual manner of death varied. Some would suddenly drop dead of heart failure while out walking or after dinner. Others died in a general convulsion. A few would begin to spit massive amounts of blood from their lungs as if they had severe pneumonia; or they would show signs of suffering from severe jaundice because their liver had failed. Often, death was heralded by violent diarrhoea after which the patient would collapse in a coma. When the authorities began to replace real food with food substitutes, many prisoners also died from perforation of the intestine.

Dr Lee's observations are borne out by others who survived the camps. Harry Wu noted that 'The heart does not stop beating from lack of nourishment. Depending on your overall health, you can survive for a week, even two, with no food or water at all. In such a depleted state, it is other things that kill you. Sometimes you catch cold, your lungs fill with fluid, finally you stop breathing. Sometimes bacteria in the food cause continuous diarrhoea that leads to death. Sometimes infection from a wound becomes fatal. The cause of death is always in your file as pleurisy or food poisoning or injury, never as starvation.'

Dr Tensing Choedak, while in the Jiuzhen prison camp in the Tenger Desert, Gansu, observed that in the first stage of starvation 'one and all resembled living skeletons. Ribs, hips and shin bones protruded, chests were concave, eyes bulged, teeth were loose, black hair turned russet, then beige and then fell out.'<sup>7</sup> Prisoners' eyes also weakened and they lost the ability to see properly at night. This stage was followed by oedema, and inmates like Harry Wu quickly learned what would happen next: 'For the first time I saw a person with one leg swollen and the other thin as a stick. I began to recognise the symptoms of oedema. First someone's foot would swell so that he could not wear his shoe. Slowly the swelling moved up through the ankle, the calf, the knee, the thigh. When it reached the stomach and made breathing difficult, a person died quickly.'<sup>8</sup> A professor of English, Wu Ningkun, describes in *A Single Tear* his feelings of horror as he realizes his own body is changing: 'I was the first to come down with a serious case of oedema. I became emaciated, my ankles swelled and my legs got so weak that I often fell while walking to the fields for forced labour. I did not know what I looked like as there were no mirrors around but I could tell from the ghastly looks of the other inmates that I must have been quite a sight.'<sup>9</sup>

Children came down with the same symptoms even in the cities. In *A Mother's Ordeal*, Chi An, who was then a small girl in Shenyang, the provincial capital of Liaoning province, describes what happened to her family:

*With the exception of the baby, all of us swelled up and turned a whiteish yellow, like pale turnips. We had so much fluid under our skin that if we cut ourselves, we no longer bled. Instead of blood, little beads of faintly pink liquid would ooze out. A scab never formed, and even the smallest scrape took a long time to heal.*

In Ningxia province far to the west, prisoners believed that once the swelling reached the head, a person was doomed: "The person soon resembled a balloon that had been filled full of air – the eyes would swell so that they became small slits: light couldn't penetrate them and one could not see out. But simple, straightforward oedema could still not be described as a death mask. If the skin on the part that was swelling began to split and a yellow glandular fluid oozed out, then death was not far away.'<sup>10</sup>

All remarked that in the final stage a person would develop this 'mask' which signalled that death must follow in a day or two. In *Grass Soup*, Zhang Xianliang describes this phenomenon vividly:

*Needless to say, men with such death masks were emaciated. In addition, the skin of their faces and entire bodies turned a dull, dark colour; their hair looked dried-out and scorched: the mucus of their eyes increased but the eyes themselves became exceedingly, strangely bright. They emitted a 'thief's glare', a kind of shifty, scared yet crafty, debilitated but also poisonous light. No one felt afraid when they saw it though, for they knew that their own eyes were not much different.*

A similar description comes in *Red in Tooth and Claw*, in which Han Weidan recalls, 'If you saw us, you would find each face starved into a pale mask, without flesh or life. Such faces were little different from those of the departed. No matter its shape, the face of the starvation victim is covered by only a fragile layer of skin. The eyes are hardly eyes but rather the pits of nuts fitted into sockets of bone. Such eyes shed no light.'

Strangely enough, people appeared to get better just before the end. Harry Wu was surprised by this when he watched the death of his friend Ma, a peasant arrested for stealing grain to feed his family. 'I had watched the swelling travel up Ma's body. His skin stretched so tight it became bright and smooth like glass. During his last days he seemed to experience increased energy and cheerfulness. His thin pale face regained some rosy colour. I later recognised those changes as typical of the last days of oedema. "The last redness of the setting sun" we said.'

Although all these descriptions of oedema come from writings about prison camps, peasants in villages in Anhui and Henan and just outside Beijing gave me identical descriptions. One man who grew up in Fengtai, a suburb of Beijing, recalled that as a child he knew that those people around him with heads swollen from oedema were certain to die within weeks.

Incredibly, some people did come back from the dead. When I was in a village in Anhui, a woman pointed to a man working outside, saying that he had literally returned from death. As a boy of about 9 during the famine, his family had given him up for dead but then someone forced some nourishing soup down his throat and he recovered. In some instances, even prisoners taken away for burial recovered. This happened to the Tibetan Ama Adhe, as she relates in *A Strange Liberation*:

*My condition deteriorated, until finally I couldn't even walk. I would just sit there, maybe saying mantras. And one night I felt that my nose was getting very cold... I thought maybe it is my turn to die of starvation... the next morning I heard rushing water like a waterfall or a stream. And when I looked up, I saw that I had been thrown into the wooden cage that they built to hold the dead bodies. I realised where I was and I felt so sad, and I made a final prayer to His Holiness and the triple gem. Then the workers came round to carry away these corpses, and when they saw me they yelled out, 'Hey, this one has her eyes open!' And I was carried back to my cell.*

Han Weitian was actually taken to the morgue in his labour camp: ‘There were times when I sensed I was at last parting from the world. It was not a sense of pain, but only a feeling of yielding. The ache of hunger induced a feeling of suffocation so keen that one day I suddenly lost consciousness. I was later told that after I had passed out they found I had stopped breathing and was stiff and cold.’ A friend of his who was the camp doctor came to hear of what had happened and went to examine him in the morgue. Han had already been lying there for half an hour when the doctor arrived. At first, the doctor failed to detect any sign of life but then, using a stethoscope, he heard faint breathing and brought Han to a fireside where he administered an injection and fed him some thin lukewarm gruel. Miraculously, Han recovered. Dr Lee, too, managed to save several patients on the point of death by injecting them with thiamine, a form of vitamin B1.

Living on the verge of death produced a strange state of mind, as Han Weitian recalls:

*In those years, starvation became a sort of mental manacle, depriving us of our freedom to think. We could not for a moment forget its threat. It seemed to be continuously putrefying the air and making it difficult to breathe... it is strange that hunger can cause so much pain in your body. It seems like a vice pinching all your bones which feel dislocated for lack of flesh and sinews. Your head, hands, feet, even your belly and bowels are no longer where they normally are. You are tempted to cry out loud but haven't the strength. When experiencing extreme hunger, one can barely utter an audible sound.*

In *Grass Soup*, Zhang Xianliang remembers the feeling of suffocation:

*This problem was not a result of some illness of the central respiratory system nor was it caused by injury to the head or lung disease. The fatigue of my body simply led to an exhaustion of my lungs as if they were too worn out to work. I often did forget to breathe and found that I would suddenly be dizzy, with pricks of light behind my eyes. Darkness would rise up before me as I fell over. Later I became accustomed to remembering to take in oxygen.*

The final moment of death was often peaceful. The Tibetan Tenpa Soepa remarked: ‘Dying from hunger can actually be an easy way to die. Not very painful. People would be sitting, and then fall over and die. No moans of agony.’<sup>11</sup> Dr Choedak also noticed how calm the final moments were. People lay immobile on the *kang* and then ‘their breath became softer and more shallow until, at the last moment, bubbles of saliva slipped over their lips and they died’.<sup>12</sup>

Many were not so fortunate and died painfully from the food substitutes which were introduced in 1960 and 1961. At times 80 per cent of the food served to prisoners was made up of substitutes. Such substances split the digestive tract or the sphincter. Outside the prisons people died in the same way. Like the prisoners, the peasants ate tree bark, corncobs, the chaff from soybeans, sorghum, wheat and other grains, ground-up roots and corn stalks. They also ate large amounts of grasses and weeds and anything else they could find which looked edible. This was all collected and thrown into the pot – the grass soup of Zhang’s book. Tenpa Soepa, who like many others survived by eating wild grass, noticed that ‘if you looked in the toilet it didn’t look like a human being’s toilet. All the stools were green from the grass and undigested leaves.’

Some prisoners were even fed sawdust and wood pulp. Jean Pasqualini describes in *Prisoner of Mao* what happened in the Lake Xingkai camp in Heilongjiang in 1960. Dark brown sheets of the stuff arrived at the kitchens:

*We prisoners had the honour of being the guinea pigs for the various ersatzes the scientific community came up with. The warder describing the new nutritional policy told us that paper pulp was guaranteed harmless and though it contained no nutritive value, it would make our wo'tous fatter and give us the satisfying impression of bulk. The new flour mix would be no more than thirty per cent powdered paper pulp. It will go through your digestive tracts easily, he said with assurance. We know exactly how you will feel.*

The experiment led to mass constipation and a number of deaths among older and weaker prisoners. The wood pulp was abandoned although the government also tried out another variety of food substitute on the prisoners – marsh-water plankton.

*They skimmed the slimy, green stuff off the swampy ponds around the camp and mixed it in with the mush either straight or dried and powdered, since it tasted too horrible to eat unaccompanied. Again we all fell sick and some of the weaker ones died. That particular plankton, they discovered after a few autopsies, was practically unassimilative for the human body. End of plankton experiment. At length our daily ersatz became ground corncobs, mixed in with the wo'tou flour. Afterwards it was adopted as the standard food supplement for the country at large.*

In the countryside people also ate the straw of their huts, the cotton in their coats or mattresses, tree leaves and blossoms, and the feathers of ducks and chickens. Prisoners recounted how they chewed their shoes and boots, belts, coats and anything else made of leather. In Lanzhou, people actually raided the local tanneries for leather to eat.

The worst substitute of all derived from an ancient and mistaken belief that eating compounds of earth and weeds would fill up one’s stomach and provide enormous endurance. This soil was known as ‘Buddha’s soil’ or ‘Guanyin soil’, Guanyin being the goddess of mercy. In Gansu, peasants boiled the soil before eating it. One doctor recalls how he went to a Gansu village where the entire population, 800 in all, had died after eating Guanyin soil.<sup>13</sup> When the medical team dissected some of the corpses, they found the soil had blocked up the intestine and it could not be digested or excreted. Another doctor, working elsewhere in China, believes such a practice was common:

*People mixed it [the Guanyin soil] with corn flour and the bread made of this mixture was edible and, more important, very filling. As the news spread, tens of thousands of people copied this invention. But once in the stomach, the soil dried out all the moisture in the colon and the patients could not defecate for days. I had to open up their stomachs. I did this operation on about fourteen people every day. Many people never made it to the hospital and others died on the operating table. I had a note typed out and took it to the street committees in the district around the hospital. I saw people dropping dead with my own eyes. Nobody was interested in what I had to tell them. All they thought about was food.<sup>14</sup>*

Those in the cities were driven to forage for food like the survivors of some apocalyptic disaster. In *Son of the Revolution*, Liang Heng describes his childhood in Changsha, Hunan: ‘I grew accustomed to going with my sisters to the Martyr’s Park to pull up a kind of edible wild grass that could be made into a paste with broken grains of rice and steamed and eaten as “bittercakes”. Gradually, even this became scarce and we had to walk miles to distant suburbs to find any.’<sup>15</sup> Far to the north in Shenyang, Chi An made pancakes out of leaves picked from the poplars which lined the streets. The leaves were soaked overnight to remove tannic acid, then dipped in flour and browned in a wok without oil.

*The smell of these leaf pancakes frying made my mouth water, but they didn’t taste nearly as good as they looked. Despite the soaking, the*



*poplar leaves retained an acid bite that made my salivary glands scream in protest. The worst part was the constipation they brought on. A day after Mother added them to our diet, we stopped having bowel movements. For a week after that, we felt increasingly bloated and crampy. Finally mother told us we would have to dig the hard little balls of faeces out with our fingers. My brother and I were too hungry to mind very much, though; we continued to devour the pancakes without protest.*<sup>16</sup>

In the desperate search for food many died from eating poisonous mushrooms, berries or leaves. A doctor who worked in one city hospital said that the emergency department was filled with people who had eaten poisonous wild vegetables.

Alcoholics, unable to satisfy their addiction, also died from drinking methanol, industrial alcohol and any number of other substitutes. To stop people from eating seeds after they were sown, the leaders of some communes and labour camps had the seeds dipped in poison. Sometimes scavenging children died from eating them.<sup>17</sup>

Overeating could also kill. When better food became available at harvest time or after 1962, people ate more than their enfeebled digestive systems could cope with. Han Weitian has estimated that 2,000 fellow prisoners died from ‘gourmandizing’ in his camp in Qinghai. Prisoners there tried to build up their health by eating in a single sitting up to eighteen loaves of a black bread made out of pea powder. Then they returned to their heavy work: ‘They more often than not ended up with stomach-aches. Some of these greedy eaters simply died in the field from violent stomach-aches. Such victims howled with pain while holding their swollen bellies.’ One interviewee in Sichuan, who had been sent as a rightist to Ya’an, a poor region in the mountains west of Chengdu, recalls how many peasants died of overeating at the Spring Festival in 1962. On this rare occasion the peasants could fill their bellies with dumplings made of wheat and beans but their digestive systems broke down, often with fatal results. Even a medical team sent to treat famine victims in Gansu killed many patients by giving them too much food.

Since no one was permitted to acknowledge the reality of the famine, medical efforts to deal with the crisis were doomed to failure. Even in the hospitals in major cities, doctors were provided with few resources. Since they themselves were often starving, they could not stand up to the strain. At times as many as a third of the staff of one Beijing hospital were off sick. The one remedy available to doctors was to recommend a special diet for their patients. Those who contracted tuberculosis, which was very common, were given extra coupons to buy two ounces of sugar a month as well as milk and pig’s liver.

Prolonged starvation left lasting effects on its victims. Many children developed rickets. A few became mentally retarded. Most found themselves to be shorter and smaller than normal when they matured. Several interviewees who had been young children during the famine claimed that they were six inches shorter than they would otherwise have been. Very few women were able to have children during the famine. A large proportion stopped menstruating because of the lack of protein in their diet. Some students sent down to the countryside said that they stopped menstruating for as long as five years. Women who did give birth often died because they did not stop bleeding. Mothers who survived found that they could not produce enough milk to feed their babies. Statistics from Fengyang in Anhui also reveal that many women suffered from prolapse of the uterus, the collapse of the womb. Those female peasants who were forced to work in the paddy fields also contracted infections from spending long periods up to their waists in water.

Even when in early 1961 medical teams were sent to some of the worst-affected areas in the countryside, the fiction about the famine was maintained. One doctor who spent three months on a relief mission in Gansu recalls that the Party organized a meeting on their return at which they were warned not to talk of the deaths they had witnessed. A Party official insisted that not a single death had occurred and that to deny this would constitute treason.<sup>18</sup>

## Cannibalism

‘I take a look at history: it is not a record of time but on each page are confusedly written the characters “benevolence, righteousness, and morals”. Desperately unsleeping, I carefully look over it again and again for half the night, and at last find between the lines that it is full of the same words – “cannibalism!”’ Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman*, 1918

When, 2,000 years ago, the Han dynasty was established amidst enormous upheaval, it was recorded that nearly half the people in the empire died of starvation. This prompted the founding emperor Gao Zu to issue an official edict in 205 BC authorizing people to sell or eat their children if necessary. Over two millennia later his words were still being obeyed in Anhui. There, peasants practised a tradition of swapping their children with those of their neighbours to alleviate their hunger and to avoid consuming their own offspring. Villagers in Anhui described this practice in a phrase of classical Chinese – *i tzu erh shih*, or *yi zi er shi* in the modern pinyin spelling – that dates back still further.<sup>1</sup> Nothing better demonstrates the remarkable continuity of Chinese culture than the fact that this phrase was first employed 2,500 years ago. In May 594 BC, the Chu army besieged the Song capital. Eventually its starving inhabitants sorrowfully recorded that ‘in the city, we are exchanging our children and eating them, and splitting up their bones for fuel’.

During the famine of the Great Leap Forward, peasants killed and ate their children in many parts of China. In *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang recounts the story told by a senior Party official about an incident in Sichuan:

*One day a peasant burst into his room and threw himself on the floor, screaming that he had committed a terrible crime and begging to be punished. Eventually it came out that he had killed his own baby and eaten it. Hunger had been like an uncontrollable force driving him to take up the knife. With tears rolling down his cheeks, the official ordered the peasant to be arrested. Later he was shot as a warning to baby killers.*

At the other end of the country, in Liaoning province, the Shenyang provincial Party newspapers also reported cases of cannibalism. In *A Mother's Ordeal*, a classmate of Chi An, whose story it tells, records what happened in her own hamlet:

*A peasant woman, unable to stand the incessant crying for food of her two-year-old daughter, and perhaps thinking to end her suffering, had strangled her. She had given the girl's body to her husband, asking him to bury it. Instead, out of his mind with hunger, he had put the body into the cooking pot with what little food they had foraged. He had forced his wife to eat a bowl of the resulting stew. His wife, in a fit of remorse, had reported her husband's crime to the authorities. The fact that she voluntarily came forward to confess made no difference. Although there was no law against cannibalism in the criminal code of the People's Republic, the Ministry of Public Security treated such cases, which were all too common, with the utmost severity. Both husband and wife were arrested and summarily executed.<sup>2</sup>*

In interviews, peasants readily acknowledged that they had witnessed cannibalism at first hand. ‘It was nothing exceptional,’ a local official told me in Anhui, while in Sichuan the former head of a village production team said he thought it had happened ‘in every county and most villages’. Official Party documents bear this out. In one county in southern Henan, Gushi, the authorities recorded 200 cases of cannibalism in a population of 900,000 at the start of the famine. In Anhui's Fengyang county, with 335,000 people in 1958, the Party noted 63 cases of cannibalism in one commune alone. Interviewees also spoke of cannibalism occurring in Shaanxi, Ningxia and Hebei provinces. Former inmates of labour camps personally witnessed cases of cannibalism in camps in Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and Heilongjiang. In the Qinghai prison camps, prisoners regularly cut the flesh off corpses and sold or ate it. Outside the camps, it was the same. A Tibetan peasant from Tongren county in Qinghai remembers that among the youths from Henan who were settled there, one girl killed an 8-year-old child and ate the corpse with three others. All four were arrested. In another case, a Tibetan family was caught eating the flesh from a child's corpse.

There are enough reports from different parts of the country to make it clear that the practice of cannibalism was not restricted to any one region, class or nationality. Peasants not only ate the flesh of the dead, they also sold it, and they killed and ate children, both their own and those of others. Given the dimensions of the famine, it is quite conceivable that cannibalism was practised on a scale unprecedented in the history of the twentieth century. Moreover, it took place with the knowledge of a government which is still in power and which wields considerable influence over world affairs. This startling fact is all the more plausible when one looks at the documented history of cannibalism in China and other parts of the world.

In the West, cannibalism is considered the ultimate taboo, the worst act of savagery, but it is far from unknown. Greek literature and the records of ancient Egypt frequently mention famine-related cannibalism. In Western Europe it often occurred during famines and the wartime sieges of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In this century, two major incidents of recorded cannibalism in the West stand out: those in the Nazi concentration camps and in the Ukraine.

At the trial of the Treblinka concentration camp commandant after the Second World War, a former British internee testified that while clearing away dead bodies, he and his staff noted that a piece of flesh was missing from as many as one in ten cadavers:

*I noticed on many occasions a very strange wound at the back of the thigh of many of the dead. First of all I dismissed it as a gunshot wound at close quarters but after seeing a few more I asked a friend and he told me that many of the prisoners were cutting chunks out of the bodies to eat. On my next visit to the mortuary I actually saw a prisoner whip out a knife, cut a portion of the leg of a dead body, and put it quickly into his mouth.<sup>3</sup>*

The cannibalism which occurred during the Ukrainian famine of 1932-3 has closer parallels with China during the Great Leap Forward. Faced with an almost identical set of circumstances, Ukrainian peasants behaved much as the Chinese were to do nearly thirty years later. The Italian Consul in the then capital of Kharkov wrote in June 1933 to his embassy in Moscow that ‘at present some 300 cases of cannibalism have been brought before a tribunal in Kharkov. Doctors of my acquaintance have noticed human flesh on sale at the market place.’<sup>4</sup>

An eyewitness who testified in an inquiry into the famine held by the US Congress in 1988 said that ‘if a person was selling meat, the police would immediately seize the meat to check if it was human or dog meat. There were people who had no qualms about cutting off a piece of flesh from a dead body which they would sell in order to get money for bread.’ Cannibalism was so common that the secret police, the OGPU, issued instructions on how

to deal with it. In May 1933 the Vice-Commissar of the OGPU and the chief procurator of the Ukraine told their subordinates:

*The present criminal code does not cover punishment of persons guilty of cannibalism, therefore all cases of those accused of cannibalism must immediately be transferred to the local branches of the OGPU. If cannibalism was preceded by murder, covered by article 142 of the Penal Code, these cases should be withdrawn from the courts and from the prosecution divisions of the People's Commissariat of Justice system and transferred for judgment to the Collegium of the OGPU in Moscow.*<sup>5</sup>

The Italian Consul reported a number of cases in which parents were arrested for infanticide and subsequently went mad:

*Very frequent is the phenomenon of hallucination in which people see their children only as animals, kill them and eat them. Later, some, having recuperated with proper food, do not remember wanting to eat their children and deny even being able to think of such a thing. The phenomenon in question is the result of a lack of vitamins and would prove to be a very interesting study, alas one which is banned even from consideration from a scientific point of view.*<sup>6</sup>

Such terrible thoughts were prompted by a famine in which over 5 million died. Yet the Ukraine has some of the richest agricultural land in the world and famine there, although not unknown, was rare. By contrast, famine was such a regular occurrence throughout Chinese history that there existed a sort of 'famine culture' passed down through the generations. As many observers quoted in [Chapter 1](#) pointed out, people knew what sort of wild vegetation could be eaten, what should be sold first to raise money and which members of a family should be sacrificed before others. Anhui peasants even believed that they knew how to detect cannibalism – those who ate human flesh smelt strange and their eyes and skin turned red.

The consumption of human flesh in China was not, however, limited to times of famine. Indeed one authority on the subject has concluded that cannibalism holds a unique place in Chinese culture and that the Chinese 'have admired the practice of cannibalism for centuries'. The American academic Kay Ray Chong has found numerous references to the practice in Chinese historical records and literature as well as in medical texts. In *Cannibalism in China*, published in 1990, Chong looked at cannibalism under two main headings: 'survival' cannibalism which took place as a last resort; and 'learned' cannibalism undertaken for other reasons. It is the latter which sets the Chinese apart. They are, he writes, 'quite unique in the sense [that] there are so many examples of learned cannibalism throughout their history'. In many periods of Chinese history, human flesh was considered a delicacy. In ancient times, cooks prepared exotic dishes of human flesh for jaded upper-class palates. Enough accounts of the various methods used to cook human flesh have been preserved for Chong to devote a whole chapter to them. For example, a Yuan dynasty writer, Dao Qingyi, recommends in *Chuo geng lu (Records of Stopping Cultivation)* that children's meat is the best-tasting food and proposes eating children whole, including their bones. He refers to men and women as 'two-legged sheep' and considers women's meat even more delicious than mutton.

Chinese literature is filled with accounts of Epicurean cannibalism. One of China's most famous works of literature, *Shui hu zhuan*, or *The Water Margin* (also translated as *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *All Men are Brothers*), contains frequent references to the sale of human meat and descriptions of cannibalism. Cooking methods are described in graphic detail. For example, when one of the main characters, Wu Sung, visits a wine shop, he is led into a room 'where men were cut to pieces, and on the walls there were men's skins stretched tight and nailed there, and upon the beams of the roof there hung several legs of men'.

Human flesh was regarded as part food, part medicine. In 1578, Li Shizhen published a medical reference book (*Ben cao gang mu*, or *Materia Medica*) which listed thirty-five different parts or organs, and the various diseases and ailments that they could be used to treat. Some parts of the body were especially valued because they were thought to boost sexual stamina. In the Ming dynasty, powerful eunuchs tried to regain their sexual potency by eating young men's brains. During the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing, numerous Western accounts testified to the Chinese belief that drinking human blood would increase a man's sexual appetite. Whenever a public execution took place, women whose husbands were impotent would buy bread dipped in the fresh blood of the executed. As late as the nineteenth century, it was not unusual for Chinese executioners to eat the heart and brains of criminals.

Cannibalism was also a gesture of filial piety. Records from the Song dynasty (AD 420-79) talk of how people would cut off part of their own body to feed a revered elder. Often a daughter-in-law would cut flesh from her leg or thigh to make soup to feed a sick mother-in-law and this practice became so common that the state issued an edict forbidding it.

Throughout Chinese history, cannibalism was also extremely common in times of war. Not only was it the last resort of inhabitants trapped in besieged cities or fortresses, but in addition, prisoners of war or slain enemies often became a staple source of food. Under the Emperor Wu Di (AD 502-49) prisoners were purchased in cages. When there was a demand for meat, they would be taken out, killed, broiled and consumed. During the Yellow Turban rebellion in the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907), thousands were butchered and eaten every day. A century later Wang Yancheng of the Min kingdom was said to have salted and dried the corpses of enemy soldiers which his men would take with them as supplies.

Such practices continued into modern times. During the Taiping rebellion of 1850-64, the hearts of prisoners were consumed by both sides to make them more bold in combat. Human flesh and organs were openly sold in the marketplace during this period and people were kidnapped and killed for food. Chinese soldiers stationed on Taiwan before the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5 also bought and ate the flesh of aborigines in the marketplace.

Cannibalism is also an expression of revenge and was recommended by Confucius. It was not enough, he said, to observe the mourning period for a parent murdered or killed in suspicious circumstances. Heaven would praise those who took revenge. Killing alone, however, was not sufficient. Enemies should be entirely consumed, including their bones, meat, heart and liver. Chinese historical records are littered with examples of kings and emperors who killed and ate their enemies, among them some of the greatest figures, such as the Emperor Qinshihuangdi, who first unified China. Liu Bang, the founder of the succeeding Han dynasty, distributed small pieces of his enemies for his vassals to consume as a way of testing their loyalty. Traitors were chopped up and pickled. In some cases, the victor of a struggle would force his enemy to eat a soup made from his son or father. Even buried enemies were not safe.

Little had changed by the nineteenth century. James Dyer Ball in *Things Chinese* recorded what happened when Cantonese villagers fell out over water rights in 1895. After armed clashes, the prisoners who had been taken were killed. Then their hearts and livers were distributed and eaten, even young children being allowed to participate in the feast. During the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists in the 1940s, there are also recorded instances when prisoners were killed and eaten in revenge.

Under Communist rule, cannibalism to obtain revenge continued, notably during the Cultural Revolution in Guangxi province in the far south of China. According to official documents obtained by the Chinese writer Zheng Yi, in some schools students killed their principals in the school courtyard and then cooked and ate their bodies to celebrate a triumph over 'counter-revolutionaries'. Government-run cafeterias in the province are said to have displayed bodies dangling on meat hooks and to have served human flesh to employees. One document relates that 'There are many varieties of cannibalism and among them are these: killing someone and making a big dinner of it, slicing off the meat and having a big party, dividing up the flesh so

each person takes a large chunk home to boil, roasting the liver and eating it for its medicinal properties, and so on.’<sup>7</sup>

The documents obtained by Zheng Yi suggest that at least 137 people, and probably hundreds more, were eaten in Guangxi. The cannibalism was organized by local Communist Party officials and people took part to prove their revolutionary ardour. In one case, the first person to strip the body of a school principal was the former girlfriend of the principal’s son. She wanted to show that she had no sympathy with him and was just as ‘red’ as anyone else. Harry Wu, in *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, records a similar incident while he was at the Wang Zhuang coal-mine in Shanxi. A prisoner called Yang Baoyin was summarily executed by firing squad for writing the words ‘Overthrow Chairman Mao’ and his brains were eaten by a Public Security cadre.

In *Cannibalism in China*, Chong concludes that cannibalism probably occurred on a massive scale in times of great convulsions. There is every reason to believe that this also holds true for the Great Leap Forward, a dark and secret legacy of China’s ancient culture which few inside or outside China wish to confront. This chapter began with an extract from a short story by one of the most famous twentieth-century Chinese writers, Lu Xun. Since it is written in the style of Nietzsche, Western readers assume it is allegorical, but Chinese readers would surely read it as a tirade against the unchanging realities of life in China.



## Life in the Cities

‘There were tens of thousands of people roaming the streets and looking for food. When you sat down to eat... all these people would be watching you.’ Interviewee, Chengdu

The gulf between town and country in China is so wide that most city-dwellers were only dimly aware that people were dying in the countryside during the famine. One member of a group of Shanghai students who went on holiday to Gansu to visit the sites of the Silk Road at the height of the famine recalled that when they saw emaciated wretches dying in the streets they simply assumed that this was normal. Even the journalist Zhu Hong, wife of the dissident Liu Binyan, failed to grasp that millions were starving to death in Sichuan when in 1960 she was sent to Chongqing to research an article about the spirit of self-reliance. And a former student in Beijing is still stricken with guilt because he encouraged his girlfriend to go back to her home in the countryside since he was worried that she was losing weight. Months later a letter arrived informing him that she had starved to death.<sup>1</sup>

The barriers separating the 90 million people privileged to live in the cities and the rest of the population – around 500 million – went up within a few years of the Communist victory in 1949. The state undertook to provide those living in the cities with food, housing and clothing. With the introduction of food rationing, the corollary measure, the internal passport, became essential. This ensured that anyone registered as living in a village could not enter a city without permission and could not obtain state grain rations. Urban or rural status was determined at birth and was usually hereditary. In effect, the state had reduced the majority of China’s population to the level of passport-holders from a separate and foreign country.

In the Soviet Union, Stalin had introduced the internal passport in 1932, as a way of dealing with the consequences of the famine. Without urban residency, starving peasants seeking food were turned back or arrested by militia posted at railway stations and checkpoints on all roads leading into the cities. The system served the same purpose in China and the results won praise from foreign visitors in the 1950s. They were no longer troubled by the sight of beggars and starving wretches on the streets of wealthy Shanghai as they had been before 1949, a sight which had come to symbolize the immorality of capitalism. Chinese city-dwellers, too, appreciated the change. Fixed rations brought security because the state would feed them no matter how bad the harvests were.

Within the cities, not everyone received the same rations. Urban society was carefully stratified and high status was rewarded with higher rations. As in imperial times, a member of the state apparatus was graded on a scale from 1 to 24, according to his or her political loyalty; and depending on his or her grade, each individual was allocated one of three kinds of ration books. In all cases, women were given lower rations than men. Those in the top grades, from 1 to 13, were entitled to the largest grain rations and in addition received 4 lbs (or *catties*) of pork, sugar, eggs and yellow beans, and four boxes of cigarettes a month. Second-class people received less grain, no sugar and half as much pork, eggs and beans. Those in the bottom class were given no pork or eggs, but one box of cigarettes and 2 lbs of yellow beans. Other food and goods could be bought in the marketplace with the pocket money given as wages, but during the Great Leap Forward the city markets were closed down.<sup>2</sup>

In the push towards Communism, the number of goods distributed by the rationing system grew and grew. Cloth, cotton, matches, soap, candles, needles, thread, cooking oil, wood, paper, coal and other fuels, fish, meat, beancurd and so on could only be acquired with coupons. The soap ration was one bar per month and in some places a ticket was necessary to obtain hot water or a bath.

This rationing system was complicated still further by the fact that some coupons were only valid in a certain province, city, county or commune. Local ration tickets often became worthless if they were not used within a month, a measure designed to prevent hoarding or trading. Other goods such as biscuits could be purchased with cash but only if accompanied by a voucher. The most precious tender was a national grain ticket because it could be used to obtain food anywhere and it amounted in effect to an alternative currency. A national voucher for a pound of grain was worth 2.5 to 3 yuan but in famine-stricken regions such vouchers became more treasured than gold. City-dwellers sometimes answered appeals from rural relatives by posting them grain vouchers but joy would turn to despair when, as sometimes happened, the recipients discovered that no grain could be obtained at any price.

As China moved to realize full Communism, the urban rationing system began to break down. As happened during the Soviet Union’s first five-year plan, China’s Great Leap Forward was accompanied by a massive internal migration of labourers to man the hastily erected factories or help finish crash building projects. In Beijing, ten huge building projects, including the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square, were completed in time to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Communist victory in 1959. The sudden extra burden of these tens of millions of additional mouths imposed an immense and intolerable strain on the rationing system. According to statistics released in 1985, the urban population of China doubled from 99.4 million in 1957 to 187.2 million in 1958. If these figures are reliable, a staggering 87 million peasants took part in the greatest organized migration in Chinese history. Other sources suggest a much lower but still impressive total of 30 million.<sup>3</sup> (It is possible that the larger statistic indicates that 87 million people received state grain for working in the cities *and* on various dams and other public works in the countryside.)

At the end of 1959, as the famine deepened, most of these peasants were sent home. A further 10 million went back to the countryside in 1960 when the Party began to empty the cities to lessen the burden on state grain stores. This mass movement in and out of the cities makes it difficult to interpret official statistics on urban birth and death rates. Chinese statistics purport to show that there were no ‘excess deaths’ in the cities during the famine although the birth rate halved and the death rate rose steeply. These figures are contradicted by interviewees who made it clear that many *did* die of hunger but over a shorter time span than in the countryside.

In the cities, the gravest food shortages began in the winter of 1959. Shenyang, capital of Liaoning province, abandoned monthly food rations in late 1959 and stopped issuing cooking oil in early 1960 when all vegetables, including the ubiquitous winter cabbage, vanished from the shops.<sup>4</sup> The same was true in most other cities where, by the spring of 1960, there was nothing but grain to eat. At that time the grain ration began to be cut. In Shenyang, the authorities reduced the adult grain ration from at least 28 lbs to just over 13 lbs a month. Children received half as much. In Beijing’s universities, male students who normally received top-grade rations saw their monthly allotment dwindle from 33 lbs a month to 26 lbs and then still less. (Rations for female students fell from 28 lbs to 22 lbs.) A former student of the Beijing Institute for National Minorities, Tsering Doije Gashi, recalled the effect this had: ‘Students’ monthly ration fell to 22 lbs of food grain. No matter how carefully the students eked out their food, their ration would stretch to at most 25 days. For the remaining 6 to 7 days, the students had to survive on spinach, leaves or anything remotely resembling vegetables. Such a miserable diet drained both health and strength.’<sup>5</sup>

A diet consisting of nothing but a pound of cereals a day contains only 1,600 calories. As has been noted, this is a starvation diet which causes

weight loss and eventually oedema from a lack of protein. Those with a lower status and those living in smaller cities had still less to eat. In Anhui, people living in the town of Fengyang had a monthly grain ration of 22 lbs in 1960 supplemented with 6 lbs of food substitutes.<sup>6</sup> As in other provincial cities, rice and other good-quality grains soon disappeared. In Fengyang, the town's granary switched to bean powder and finally to flour made from dried sweet potatoes. Not all parts of the city benefited even from this. One place with four communal canteens serving a thousand people provided nothing but food substitutes. In Xining, the capital of Qinghai, a province filled with state farms worked by convicts, the adult monthly grain ration fell to as low as 13.6 lbs per month.<sup>7</sup>

Shanghai seems to have had a better supply of food even than the capital, Beijing. Throughout the famine, Nien Cheng, who worked for the Shell Oil company and would later write *Life and Death in Shanghai*, received a grain ration of 40 lbs a month. In addition, her employer sent her hampers from Harrods filled with tinned sausages, Knorr soup and canned Australian butter. She recalls that in Shanghai restaurants remained open and there was a flourishing black market where you could buy an egg for 1 yuan and 4 lbs of mutton for 60 yuan – the average monthly wage. At the Shanghai Zoo, the animals continued to be fed while in nearby Anhui province millions died of hunger.<sup>8</sup> On a commune outside Shanghai, the painter Fu Hua remembers that he ate the slops intended for the pigs and fed them boiled-up human excrement instead.<sup>9</sup>

The most protected social group in the cities were Party members. As in the Soviet Union, they could buy scarce goods, above all food, in secret and unmarked shops. Although Party members claimed to share the same rations as others, this privilege shielded them from the worst hunger. One doctor, who continued to work long hours on shorter and shorter rations, recalls operating on an important Party official:

*He must have noticed my haggard face and unsteady feet. He asked me if I had had anything to eat that day and I told him I had not had a proper meal for two days. He said he would see to it, if his operation was successful. It must have been the most careful operation I ever did. Sure enough, a sack of rice and three pounds of pork were delivered to my house. I don't remember my children ever being so happy with me, as if I were the almighty Goddess of Mercy, sent from heaven to save them.*<sup>10</sup>

Nien Cheng's sister, who was a Party member in the municipal health department, continued to eat full meals in work canteens that included luxuries such as pieces of pork. In many places, top officials and their families lived in special compounds with their own canteens, shops and supplies of provisions. The army and navy used their special status to supplement their rations in other ways. Army officers in Beijing took jeeps, machine guns and spotlights to the Mongolian grasslands to hunt wild animals. Navy vessels spent their time fishing.<sup>11</sup> In hospitals, the staff would cook and eat human placentas, and pharmacists sold dried and powdered placenta which was highly sought after as a source of protein.

As the shortages worsened, access to these special shops was vital because the mere possession of a ration ticket no longer guaranteed a supply of grain. Queues became longer and longer and started earlier and earlier because those who came last might leave empty-handed. Fights frequently broke out and people resorted to various stratagems to reserve a place in the queue. Meat became absolutely unobtainable without special connections.

As in the countryside, the food shortages in the cities caused terrible mistrust between family members. Initially, the old would give the young a portion of their food but by 1960 people had begun to steal from each other. In many families, members watched with eagle eyes as the food was divided. This became a matter of such bitter contention that many, even in Beijing, used scales at each meal to ensure that everyone knew they were getting exactly their fair share. Matters were made worse if families had to send their portions of rice to be cooked at a communal canteen. In Guangzhou, schoolchildren had to bring their lunchtime rice to school where it would be cooked. One interviewee recalled how the school cooks would steal from the children by scooping back some of the cooked rice. Often men stole their wives' coupons and parents took food from their children. Divorces and separations became common as tensions rose and tempers were lost. There were cases of sons beating or even killing their own mothers. Several former prisoners remember sharing a cell with inmates who had murdered one of their parents for a bag of grain. The reverse happened, too. In Tianjin an interviewee recalled how when his younger brother stole a *wotou*, their father discovered this and beat the boy with such violence that his retina was permanently damaged. In Xining, Qinghai, a father cut his own throat after beating a son who had stolen his food.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the efforts of the militia, peasants did sneak into the cities in search of food. One interviewee told of the terrible feeling of oppression that this created in Chengdu: 'There were tens of thousands of people roaming the streets and looking for food. When you sat down to eat something in a restaurant – they had nothing except boiled noodles without fat – all these people would be watching you. When you left, the plate would be snatched away by these beggars who would then lick the plate thoroughly.'

When, in 1961, the Shanghai authorities tried to win over former capitalists as part of an attempt to restart the economy, they took Nien Cheng and other once wealthy Shanghainese on a luxury cruise up the Yangtze. There she noticed how difficult it was to keep the beggars at bay. When the party ate in restaurants, the doors were locked to prevent starving peasants rushing in, but they watched the guests eat elaborate meals of meat and fish with their faces pressed against the windows.<sup>13</sup>

In Changsha, another interviewee recalled, if anyone in the street raised a hand to their mouth, dozens of people would start staring, and if they saw that someone was eating, then they would crowd around, asking where the food had come from. In canteens, beggars would deliberately spit into the food of people eating there in the hope that they would then leave it. One interviewee who grew up in Fuzhou, capital of Fujian, remembered that people would snatch food from anyone whose attention wandered even for a second: 'I was playing at the entrance to a police station when four men dragged another in. They were carrying a bun from which this man had taken a bite. While they were struggling, the beggar grabbed it like a tiger. He didn't care how much the others cursed and kicked him as long as he could eat.'

Little mercy was shown to those caught stealing grain. In Beijing, some university students caught stealing were sent to labour camps. In Chengdu, Tsering Doije Gashi stopped to change trains on his way home:

*Stuck up on street walls everywhere we saw posters of men crossed out in red, and on enquiring what these meant, we discovered that these were thieves and robbers, shoplifters, people who robbed and stole from communal grain stores... Out of all this misery the sight which saddened me most was the spectacle of two children of tender years lying down on the pavement, their emaciated bodies shivering. They looked as if they were going to die at any moment. I was moved and wanted to give them some food but I clearly saw that they lacked the power even to open their mouths. Those living nearby related that the father of the children had stolen from the grain store and was killed and that the mother had starved to death not many days before. 'It is better that these two die. They have neither the energy nor the strength to live,' they said.*<sup>14</sup>

Between 1958 and 1961, it was an offence to buy or sell anything privately and pedlars were often sent to jail. One man recalled what happened to his grandfather in Beijing:

*We decided to raise chickens to sell. At that time this was strictly forbidden and the police patrolled the black market. My grandfather looked*



after the chickens – seven hens and three cocks. Once he wanted to buy some chocolate for his grandchildren. It was terribly expensive – 25 fen for a tiny bar in Wangfujing Street. So he decided to sell a chicken on the black market. He was soon caught by the police who were ready to send him to jail. My mother went down on her knees to apologize and said he was so old that he didn't know that it was illegal. So they let him go. If he had gone to prison, he would have died.

To raise money to buy food, however, people did sell their family treasures and heirlooms. Paintings, books, jewellery, furniture, porcelain and anything else of value all went to special state shops. These closely resembled the Soviet *torgsin* shops in the Ukraine in the 1930s, where people traded precious goods and hard currency for food vouchers. The state bought these goods at rock-bottom prices and they later reappeared in Hong Kong antique shops.

By 1960, people in nearly all the major cities in China were beginning to peel the bark from the trees and pluck the leaves. In Jinan, capital of Shandong, the police started special patrols to protect the acacia and birch trees that lined the streets. In Beijing, the trees were stripped bare. In Shenyang, the idea spread rapidly: 'Soon dozens of people were climbing the trees every day, stripping entire branches clean. Even green twigs were broken off. In the end not a touch of green life remained on any of the trees. It looked as if winter had set in again.'<sup>15</sup>

Some local newspapers even printed recipes for 'leaf pancakes' and advice on edible wild grasses and mushrooms. Sugar became the greatest and most sought-after delicacy. In Lanzhou, one interviewee wrote, 'the most serious problem was the shortage of sugar. Each person could only get four *Hang* [eight ounces] a month. Sugar was vital for people's daily life. When people felt desperately hungry, they would drink a bowl of water with sugar and it would work. Therefore sugar was like gold and people had to acquire it somehow.' Another recalled that in Changsha he once walked eight miles just to buy a cube of sugar.

In 1960 the government introduced food substitutes. People in semi-tropical Fuzhou were given ground-up banana tree roots and stems which were mixed with rice flour and then steamed. They also tried to cook with coconut oil and cod-liver oil. One interviewee recalled how in his school, the headmaster forbade his pupils to mention the substitutes when they wrote to their overseas relatives because he said they were a brilliant Chinese invention which must be kept secret. This led the interviewee, then a child, to reflect that 'We Chinese are the most intelligent people in the world. That's why we know how to make this and the stupid foreigners don't.' Elsewhere, people were given cakes made of rice husks, sugar cane fibre, beetroot and turnip tops, and other substitutes. Newspapers advised people to double-steam their food in order to enlarge its bulk and make it go further. In the cities, cats and dogs disappeared from the streets. In Guangzhou, people hunted rats, sparrows and cockroaches.

Just as in the prison camps, the authorities in the cities experimented with ersatz foods. One of the most bizarre was a green fungus called *xiaoqiu zao*, or chlorella, officially described as a unicellular hydrophyte with a 'phenomenal yield of albumin, fats, carbohydrates and vitamins' which multiplied so fast that 'thirty crops a year can be expected'. This was used for everything from making biscuits and sauces to replacing milk powder for babies. People were ordered to grow the stuff in pots filled with urine and placed on window sills. Then it was collected, dried and sprinkled on rice. In *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang recalls how 'people stopped going to the toilet and peed into spittoons instead, then dropped the chlorella seeds in: they grew into something looking like fish roe in a couple of days, and were scooped out of the urine, washed, and cooked with rice. They were truly disgusting to eat, but did reduce the swelling [from oedema].'

In Tianjin, all schools and colleges were closed down. Students spent the whole of each day trying to collect grass, tree bark and anything else they could find. Schoolchildren in Shenyang were told to put their heads on their desks, close their eyes and sleep. In Beijing, the government instructed employees not to work too hard to prevent more people from coming down with oedema. One man living in Beijing recalled that in his office 'they often checked the staff and told people to rest to prevent the entire workforce collapsing'. Factories in Guangzhou sent home workers who were weak with hunger; and in schools there daily physical exercise was stopped and children just performed ear and eye exercises. To further conserve energy, children were told to lie down at home and to go to bed early. The authorities in Guangzhou even tried out acupuncture on schoolchildren in a bid to stem their hunger pangs. So serious was the malnutrition among the city's schoolchildren that in 1961 the authorities issued pupils with a single sugar lump twice a day. Children in rural areas of the province ate papaya leaves and roots and were sent into the hills to find other wild vegetation and to catch snakes, birds, snails and grasshoppers.

Yet, amidst all this, no one was ever allowed to mention publicly or privately that there was a famine or even hint at the fact. Propaganda encouraged people to make a virtue out of eating less while newspapers reported great strides in agricultural production. In Chengdu, the authorities declared that 'a capable woman can make a meal without food', reversing an ancient saying that 'no matter how capable, a woman cannot make a meal without food'. In the north, the *Beijing Daily* reported what could be achieved by 'alternating liquid meals with solid meals'. It recounted the example of a man with a family of seven who had managed to save a third of his household's monthly ration of 217 lbs by allocating each person no more than half a pound of grain a day.

In most cities, a large proportion of the inhabitants had oedema in 1960. Several interviewees recalled that their teachers' legs were so swollen that they could no longer stand up in front of their pupils and had to sit down to teach. In Beijing universities many students had swollen limbs, and in the canteens the porridge had so little rice in it that, as one former student put it, 'you could almost see your own reflection in it'. One interviewee who grew up in Fengtai, a suburb of Beijing, remembered that many neighbours died after their limbs swelled up. His parents told him not to go outside because he might be caught and turned into dumplings. Rumours of cannibalism were rife – people told stories of buying dumplings and finding a fingernail inside.

The utter failure of the cotton harvest in Shandong and other provinces where peasants were forced to try out vernalization led to further emergency measures. In 1958 China had boasted that its cotton crop was the biggest in the world, even bigger than that of the United States, but in 1959 cotton yields fell drastically. The growers, left with nothing to eat, refused to produce any more cotton, creating an acute shortage of cloth. The authorities began to dream up ways of making what was available go further. Tailors were urged to adopt a new method of cutting cloth using a cardboard pattern. The *Worker's Daily* reported that the 'broad masses of the people deeply love the advanced method of cutting' which was hailed as a 'technical revolution'. The newspaper calculated that if each of China's 650 million people saved one foot of cloth a year, an extra 65 million suits could be made.<sup>16</sup> The annual cloth ration was cut by 60 per cent to 4½ square feet per person and people were told how to make old clothes into new. For those outside the ration system, cotton cloth was often impossible to find and peasants sometimes resorted instead to using dried straw and grasses.

To make room for the huge influx of peasants into the cities, local authorities had earlier appropriated and reallocated all housing. Expecting that, like the peasants, they would soon be forced to join communes and lose all their possessions, many city-dwellers had hurried to sell off their furniture. When fuel supplies in the cities dwindled, those with no furniture left to chop up for firewood froze.

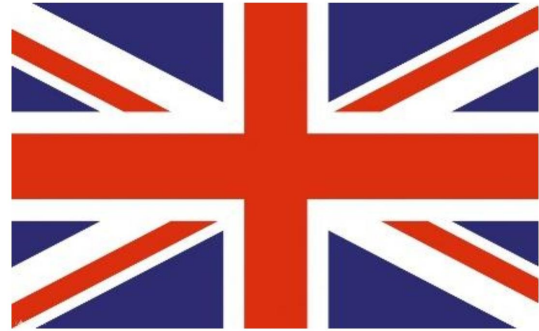
Transportation also ground to a halt: there was no petrol for cars or trucks and no coal for trains. Flights from Beijing to Guangzhou were cut from six to two a week. By early evening city streets were empty. Building lights were dimmed and light bulbs flickered with the erratic power supply.

Hotels and guest houses were empty and visitors few. Without traffic, markets, birds or dogs, the cities were shrouded in an oppressive stillness.

As the famine deepened, the Party began to empty the cities. From Beijing alone, about 100,000 inhabitants were sent into the countryside in February 1960. One young girl, arriving at the famous Seven Li commune in Henan where in 1958 Mao had approvingly said 'This name, the People's Commune, is good', found peasants and guests subsisting off as little as 17 lbs of grain a month:

*At first I found the food inedible and threw away one of the wotou. People ran to eat it. I was struggled and accused of having 'bourgeois thinking'. Most of the men had oedema and the women had stopped menstruating. Most trees had been felled. People caught stealing the bark of the remaining trees were punished. People could no longer grow their own vegetables and tried to steal food from others. The leader of our group, Yuan Mu, told us that 'the spirit makes food'.<sup>17</sup>*

BRITISH ISRAEL JUDAEO-MASONIC  
SPIRITUAL COMMUNO-FASCISM



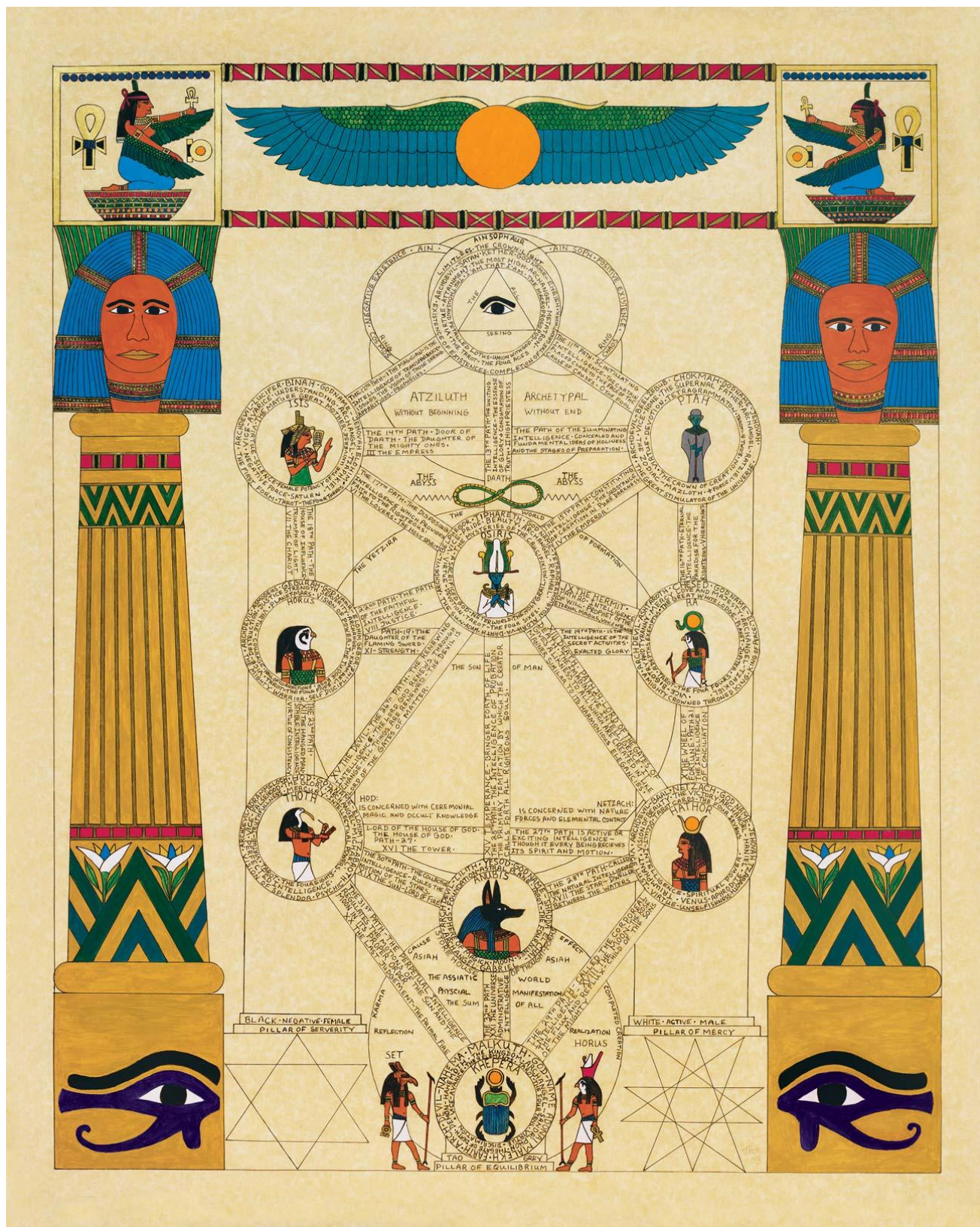
**The origin of the Union Jack conspiracy is its mockery of Christ in Rev. 1:8. It is made up of two outstanding crosses. X is Alpha. + is Omega. This is what Christ called Himself. The rulership of the world by the British Empire is a usurpation of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ The mongrel banner shown on the front cover originated in the mind of a demented tyrant who acquired his mammoth fortune in America - one Andrew Carnegie. This half Union Jack and half Stars and Stripes mean more than a freak flag waving in the breeze. It represents a Satanic conspiracy to control the world with a pseudoChristianity that is opposite to the grace of Jesus Christ.**

**THE UNION JACK** by Helen Peters

Conspiracy is invisible otherwise there would be no need for this book. In fact, if conspiracy WERE visible, there would BE no conspiracy.



# Part Three The Great Lie





## *Liu Shaoqi Saves the Peasants*

‘Even if there’s a collapse that’ll be all right. The worst that will happen is that the whole world will get a big laugh out of it.’ Mao  
Zedong in the winter of 1959<sup>1</sup>

By the end of 1960 Mao still refused to believe that death was stalking the countryside but his colleagues realized that the regime was in danger of collapse and that they must act. In early 1961, senior leaders began to dispatch inspection teams to the countryside to gather evidence that they could present to Mao. When Mao continued to insist that the famine was not the result of his policies but of the actions of counterrevolutionaries and landlords, some of the leadership led by Liu Shaoqi took matters into their own hands. Mao believed that their policies amounted to a challenge to his leadership and, by the end of 1961, a power struggle was underway between Mao and his followers on the one hand and Liu, Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping on the other. In provinces such as Qinghai and Gansu, Liu and his colleagues managed to install new leaders who were able to modify the communes, but elsewhere the provincial leadership remained firmly on Mao’s side. The evidence for what exactly took place during this period is patchy, but in August 1962 Mao staged a comeback which culminated in 1966 with the start of the Cultural Revolution in which he eliminated his enemies and almost destroyed the Party itself.

In February 1961, Zhou Enlai returned from three weeks in Hebei province and told Mao that the peasants were simply too weak to work and that villagers were determined to abandon the communes. At about the same time, Deng Xiaoping went to Shunyi county outside Beijing and returned to deliver an identical message – not only were the peasants starving but the village cadres had to steal from the communal granaries to ensure that they and their families could eat. Peng Zhen, the Mayor of Beijing, also went to the countryside together with the writer Deng Tuo and composed a report which bluntly accused Mao of ignoring reality.

Mao, however, still wielded considerable power over rural Party cadres who did their best to thwart these inspection teams, nowhere more so than in his home province of Hunan. This was sometimes called the cradle of the Party because so many of its leaders, including Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai, had been born there. Parts of the province had been hit by drought in 1959, and a policy of trying to reap two rice harvests a year instead of one had caused a serious food shortage. By 1960 many were struggling to survive on half a pound of grain a day. In the Hengyang district ‘nearly an entire production team had died of hunger, and there was no one left with the strength to bury the bodies. These were still lying scattered about in the fields from which they had been trying to pull enough to stay alive.’<sup>2</sup> Yet when Liu Shaoqi and his wife, Wang Guangmei, visited Hunan to see for themselves, local leaders went to extraordinary lengths to try and deceive them. Along the road leading to Liu’s home town of Ningxiang, starving peasants had torn the bark off the trees to eat, so officials plastered the tree trunks with yellow mud and straw to conceal the scars.<sup>3</sup> As the *People’s Daily* reported in an article published in December 1989, ‘the grassroots Party organ interfered in everything to cover up the death toll’. Liu only managed to discover the truth in the village where he had been born, Ku Mu Chong, when some villagers dared to tell him that twenty of their number had starved to death, including a nephew of Liu’s, and that a dozen more had fled. Liu was not the only senior leader to receive this treatment. That year the President of the Supreme Court, Xie Juezai, also returned to his birthplace in the same county where local officials solemnly told him that things were going so well that they were breeding two million pigs. In fact, as he later wrote, there was mass starvation.<sup>4</sup>

Just as many local officials lied to visiting senior leaders, so too did some prominent figures when reporting to Mao. The Party Secretary in Mao’s birthplace in Xiangtan, Hunan, was Hua Guofeng, a 38-year-old from Shanxi who was determined to prove his loyalty to Mao at all costs. Hua had already earned Mao’s gratitude at the Lushan summit by refuting the claims of the provincial Party leader, Zhou Xiaozhou, that there was widespread hunger in Hunan. Afterwards he wrote an article in the provincial Party newspaper headlined ‘Victory belongs to those people who raise high the Red Flag of the Great Leap Forward’. And in the anti-Peng hysteria that followed the Lushan conference, he personally supervised the brutal persecution of Peng’s family who lived in the Xiangtan prefecture.<sup>5</sup>

Mao himself did not go to Hunan but instead sent another senior Party official, Hu Yaobang, who had been born in the same district and who now headed the Party’s Youth League. Hu soon realized that most of the province’s population was starving to death and returned to Beijing to deliver his report to Mao. In 1980 Hu, by then General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and responsible for the break up of the communes after Mao’s death, told an audience of Party officials how, on the eve of his audience, he paced up and down smoking, unable to sleep. Should he tell Mao the truth? Hu’s courage failed him. As he later explained, ‘I did not dare tell the Chairman the truth. If I had done so this would have spelt the end of me. I would have ended up like Peng Dehuai.’<sup>6</sup>

Liu Shaoqi sent inspection teams to Gansu and Qinghai which were more successful and quickly managed to bring down their Party leaders and introduce reforms which helped to end the famine. As in Xinyang in Henan, the support of the local army commanders was crucial, or it would not have been possible to arrest such fanatics.

In Anhui, Zeng Xisheng tried to hold on to power by switching sides early on. As one of the most aggressive promoters of the communes, he was a pivotal figure and his reforms, the *ze ren tian* or contract field farming system, became central to the struggles within the Party during 1961 and 1962. Zeng had begun cautiously, by ordering cadres to try small-scale experiments on land outside the provincial capital, Hefei. By the spring of 1961, cadres all over the province were ready to issue every peasant household with two or three *mu* of communal land for the spring sowing. At the same time Zeng allowed the communes to abandon the collective kitchens, rehabilitated officials dismissed as rightists, and punished those who had committed the worst crimes. Yet to do all this Zeng had to have Mao’s approval. In March 1961, Zeng attended a top Party meeting in Guangzhou and reported what he was doing to a working group of the East China Bureau. China was then divided into a number of such regional bureaux and East China was controlled by the radical leftist and Shanghai Party boss, Ke Qingshi. Ke wanted to block Zeng’s *ze ren tian* system, so Zeng appealed directly to Mao. Mao himself was toying with various measures that might raise agricultural production but without openly retreating from socialism. Trusting that Zeng would not betray him, Mao gave him his blessing, saying ‘if we do it right, we can increase national grain output by 491,000 tonnes [1 billion *jin*] and that will be a great thing’.<sup>7</sup> Mao’s verdict was immediately relayed to Anhui together with instructions to promote the *ze ren tian*. A few days later, Mao changed his mind and said that only small-scale experiments were permitted. Zeng then wrote Mao a letter, again expounding the benefits of the system.

Much of what happened at this crucial juncture is obscure but Mao, although unrepentant, was under pressure from Liu Shaoqi and others who were horrified by what they had discovered in the countryside. Even hitherto loyal supporters such as Deng Xiaoping, then General Secretary of the Communist Party, believed that whatever Mao thought, there had to be a retreat. At the March meeting in Guangzhou, Deng had uttered his famous

maxim: 'It does not matter whether a cat is black or white as long as it catches mice.' In other words, ignore the principles of socialism: what matters is whether people have enough to eat or not. This sentiment would come back to haunt him five years later during the Cultural Revolution. At the time, Mao seems to have been torn between heeding the advice of his followers and sticking to his convictions. He took an immense pride in his obduracy and his doctor, Li Zhisui, in his memoirs quotes him as boasting that 'Some people don't give up their convictions until they see the Yellow River and have nowhere to retreat to. I will not give up my convictions even when I see the Yellow River.'<sup>8</sup> Confronted with such obduracy, senior leaders attempted to find a way to disguise a retreat to private farming so as to preserve the face of the Great Leader.

When senior officials met again in May, however, the attacks against Mao were blunt. Chen Yun baldly asserted that the Party should disband the communes altogether and immediately return all the land to the peasants, adding: 'The peasants do nothing now but complain. They say that under Chiang Kai-shek, they "suffered" but had plenty to eat. Under Mao everything is "great" but they eat only porridge. All we have to do is give the peasants their own land, then everyone will have plenty to eat.'<sup>9</sup> Chen Yun insisted that China import emergency grain and chemical fertilizers, and drew up plans for the construction of fourteen large and modern plants to ensure long-term supplies of the latter. At the same time millions of tonnes of grain were ordered from Australia, Canada and other countries.

It was also at around this time that Premier Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yun, who had dominated much economic policy-making until 1958, introduced a series of policies on the communes aimed at reviving the peasant economy. These were accompanied by other new regulations relating to industry, science, handicrafts and trade, finance, literature and art, education, higher education and commercial work.

Liu Shaoqi's reforms came to be known as the *san zi yi bao* or 'three freedoms, one guarantee'. They did not extend to the abandonment of collective farming and the division of the communal fields but the peasants were now free to raise their own livestock and grow food on small plots of wasteland, and to open markets and trade in everything except grain which they had to continue to guarantee to deliver to the state. These reforms amounted to the sort of collective farming which existed in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev. A variation of Liu's policy, known as *bao chan dao hu* or the 'household contract responsibility system', permitted the peasants to grow a certain amount of grain for the state on communal land but also to sell the remainder. In Hunan the peasants had a simpler term for these measures, calling them 'save yourself production'.<sup>10</sup>

In the universities, the Lysenkoists were replaced with real scientists and serious work began again on agricultural sciences.<sup>11</sup> By the summer of 1961, teachers, professors, statisticians, musicians, playwrights and other intellectuals were reinstalled in their original jobs and were being encouraged to help the return to sanity. The Party Central Committee called for scientists to be given sufficient time for their research and numerous academic forums were convened where experts were encouraged to engage in free debate. Yet even in Beijing all talk of famine continued to be forbidden as experts and other citizens obeyed instructions to grow vegetables in the wasteland allotted to each work unit and to raise chickens on their balconies. Professor Wu Ningkun recalls how in Anhui's capital, Hefei, government workers instructed to grow food were told to show the 'Yanan spirit' of self-reliance and arduous struggle. At the university there, professors cultivated small plots of land on the campus, Wu himself planting soybeans.<sup>12</sup> Even in Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound next to the Forbidden City in Beijing, everyone except Mao tried to set an example by growing their own food. Liu Shaoqi planted kidney beans with his guards. Zhu De was noted for his pumpkins. Zhou Enlai's wife, Deng Yingchao, served guests hot water and fallen tree leaves instead of tea.

In 1961, too, the reformers were for the first time in three years able to seize control of parts of the press and turn them against Mao. Thinly disguised attacks on the Great Leader began to appear. A year earlier, the *People's Daily* had claimed that Mao had 'solved problems which Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin could not, or did not have the time to solve in their lifetimes'. Now it began to publish sarcastic articles, one of which suggested that some people had 'substituted illusion for reality'. Another implied that Mao suffered from a form of mental disorder which led to irrational behaviour and decisions, and warned that this affliction 'will not only bring forgetfulness, but gradually lead to insanity'. It even went so far as to suggest that such a person should take 'a complete rest'. Another essay ridiculed the story of an ordinary athlete who was so overtaken by delusions of grandeur that he boasted of breaking the Olympic record for 'the long jump'. And one attack bitinglly referred to the split with Moscow: 'If a man with a swollen head thinks he can learn a subject easily and then kicks out his teacher, he will never learn anything'.<sup>13</sup>

Other articles in the national press talked directly of agriculture. One pointed out that in ancient times wise governments had guarded against shortages by storing grain; another urged officials to listen to the wisdom of 'sage old peasants', saying that 'traditions which have come down to us from our ancestors all contain some truth... what crops to plant, when to sow, how to cultivate, when to harvest – these cannot be changed by man's will'.

In June the *People's Daily* published a translation into modern Chinese of a memorial to the Ming Emperor Jiajing by that upright official, Hai Rui. This was soon followed by the publication of a new play about Hai Rui, which pointedly focused on the plight of peasants whose land has been confiscated and who have been oppressed by local officials. The play was written by the Deputy Mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, an expert on Ming history. In it, Hai Rui orders that the land be given back to the peasants and executes an official for abusing his power by murdering an elderly peasant. Hai Rui praises the Emperor for past deeds, but dares to criticize him for wasting resources on pointless public works while the peasants starve: 'Your mind is deluded and you are dogmatic and biased. You think you are always right and reject criticism,' Hai Rui tells the Emperor.

Apart from Wu Han, the most vocal critic of Mao's catastrophic policies was Deng Tuo who in the 1930s had written a history of famine in China. He had risen to become chief editor of the *People's Daily* but Mao had dismissed him for opposing his policies. Now, Deng reissued his book on famine and, together with Wu Han and another writer, Liao Mosha, published a series of thinly veiled satirical essays. Deng also wrote commentaries on his own, entitled *Evening Talks in Yanshan*, in which he urged leaders to go to the countryside and see for themselves what was happening. At the end of 1961, the Mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen, gave Deng and others access to all the directives issued by Mao during the Great Leap Forward so that they could study them and trace the responsibility for the disaster.

By the middle of 1961, Mao, in the face of hostility to his dreams, had decided that he would make a self-criticism and accept a small retreat, much as Lenin had done with his New Economic Policy after the first collectivization famine in 1921. In July, he met Zeng Xisheng again, this time on a train, and held another discussion about the Anhui reforms. Their conversation, reproduced in a Chinese book published in the 1990s, is a surreal exchange in which the deaths of tens of millions of people are discussed using bizarre euphemisms.<sup>14</sup> Zeng blames the failures on two 'directional' mistakes. One is described as 'considering the decrease in production as the increase in production', in other words lying. The second is termed 'regarding the left opportunist tendency in rural areas as right opportunist', meaning that the wrong people were persecuted. In this disguised and convoluted language, the Party did not make the peasants starve to death in huge numbers. Rather 'severe excess deaths' were not 'taken seriously' because of 'subjective bureaucracy'.

Throughout the exchange Mao sounds self-satisfied and places the entire blame on others. He accuses Peng Dehuai of 'messing up' his original plan for tackling leftists at the Lushan summit and he advises Zeng to draw the correct lessons from his mistakes of 'subjective bureaucracy' and be the first

to make a self-criticism. At the end Zeng succeeds in flattering a suspicious Mao into agreeing to private farming. Mao agrees to both contracting out the fields and allowing private plots in order to raise production to 1957 levels:

*Zeng: We discussed this... we think it will be a big problem to restore production to the 1957 level. We have decided to lend land to the masses...*

*Mao: This method is great! Allocating 5 per cent of the land as private plots is not enough, we should give even more land so that there won't be more deaths by starvation!*

*Zeng: We are prepared to fix the percentage of private land at 5 per cent and then each year give a little more to the masses and reach around 7-8 per cent...*

*Mao: What about 10 per cent?*

This 180-degree turn by Mao was later hushed up during the Cultural Revolution when he ordered the punishment of his colleagues, including Zeng Xisheng, for taking the capitalist road. Indeed, even at this stage in mid-1961, he had secretly decided to write them off: as he lamented to his doctor, 'All the good Party members are dead. The only ones left are a bunch of zombies.'

In the meantime Zeng went ahead and spread the *ze ren tian* system throughout Anhui. By the end of 1961 grain production had risen dramatically from 6 million to 10 million tonnes. Other places followed suit and in around 20 per cent or more of the country, a diluted form of private farming began. However, many senior leaders were reluctant to confront Mao and back sweeping concessions to the peasants that would end the food shortages. At another Party meeting at Beidaihe in August, Tao Zhu, the provincial Party leader from Guangzhou, proposed giving 30 per cent of the land to the peasants but both Premier Zhou Enlai and Marshal Zhu De remained silent. Peng Dehuai reportedly sent a letter in which he begged to be rehabilitated and criticized Zeng's experiment. And according to Zhou Yueli, Zeng's former secretary, Hu Yaobang returned from an inspection trip to Anhui and likewise criticized the abandonment of collective farming.

Officially, Mao continued neither to recognize the crisis nor formally to approve Zeng's *ze ren tian*. Officials from other provinces visited Anhui to see what was happening for themselves but by the end of the year Mao was again talking of dropping the Anhui experiment. Matters came to a head at a huge meeting held in Beijing in January 1962 and called the 7,000 Cadres Conference. At the meeting, Liu Shaoqi declared that the famine was 70 per cent the result of human error and 30 per cent the result of natural causes.

Liu had summoned the meeting to push through further rural reforms, and Anhui's *ze ren tian* was a major topic of discussion. Yet Mao dug his heels in, determined to stop it. He said he had received letters from cadres in Anhui protesting against the change and he called upon the meeting to discover what was really going on in Anhui. With most delegates clearly on Liu Shaoqi's side, Mao was facing a critical challenge to his authority. At this moment, his most loyal follower, Marshal Lin Biao, who had been promoted to succeed Peng Dehuai as Minister of Defence, spoke out in favour of Mao. According to Dr Li's memoirs:

*Lin Biao was one of the few supporters Mao had left, and the most vocal. 'The thoughts of the Chairman are always correct,' he said. 'If we encounter any problems, any difficulty, it is because we have not followed the instructions of the Chairman closely enough, because we have ignored or circumscribed the Chairman's advice.' I was sitting behind the stage, hidden by a curtain, during Lin's speech. 'What a good speech Vice-Chairman Lin has made,' Mao said to me afterwards. 'Lin Biao's words are always so clear and direct. They are simply superb! Why can't the other Party leaders be so perceptive?'*

Hua Guofeng also demonstrated his loyalty, saying: 'If we want to overcome the difficulties in our rural areas, we must insist on going the socialist road and not by adopting the household contract system or individualised farming, otherwise we will come to a dead end.'<sup>15</sup>

Most of the time, though, Mao did not attend the conference discussions. Instead, he remained in a special room in the Great Hall of the People, 'ensconced on his extra-large bed, "resting" with the young women assembled there for his pleasure, reading daily transcripts of the proceedings taking place'.<sup>16</sup> However, he did manage to insist on the dismissal of Zeng Xisheng. Despite his reforms, Zeng had little support within the rest of the Party and Liu Shaoqi wanted to punish him for the crimes committed in Anhui and have him executed. In the Cultural Revolution, Zeng allegedly asked Mao to rehabilitate him because it was Liu who had dismissed him. Another of Mao's victims was Wang Feng, who in 1961 had been put in charge of Gansu province and had tried out similar experiments in free farming in one prefecture, Linxia. Wang was sacked as was Linxia's prefectural Party Secretary, Ge Man. Four years later both men were among the first victims of the Cultural Revolution.

Among the beneficiaries of the 7,000 Cadres Conference was Lin Biao, whom Mao later designated as his successor. Another was Hua Guofeng, promoted to head the Hunan Party secretariat. From his position there, Hua opposed Liu's reforms with a vengeance. According to the *People's Daily*, 'In 1962 in order to oppose the influence of Liu Shaoqi's *san zi yi bao*, Hua led a working team to every brigade and village where the *bao chan dao hu* was implemented in order to return them to the path of socialism.' In the end it was not Lin Biao but Hua Guofeng who succeeded Mao after his death for Lin Biao died in 1971 while fleeing China after an attempted *coup d'état*.

Though Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping lost a few pawns at this conference, they nonetheless went ahead with a nationwide emergency programme. This was a modified version of Zeng's *ze ren tian* which allowed production teams, although not individual peasants, to contract out fields. Individuals could have private plots if they were on waste ground. At the same time the state's purchasing price for grain was raised, and the peasants were permitted to trade animals as long as they were not, like oxen, considered a means of production. All over China, peasants were allocated materials to replace their traditional work tools, fishing equipment, boats and carts. Under the influence of Chen Yun, the production of cash crops was also encouraged. Each region no longer had to practise self-sufficiency in grain but was allowed to grow whatever best suited its natural conditions. The size of the communes was reduced and in many of them production teams were given more autonomy.

In April 1962, Liu and Deng also introduced guidelines to rehabilitate most of the cadres and intellectuals condemned as 'right opportunists'. Some political prisoners were released and in the camps new prison commandants took over.

To ease the food shortages, the Party also began encouraging people to write to their overseas relatives and beg for food parcels. Until then the regime had treated anyone who had relatives abroad with deep suspicion. Contact could lead to imprisonment on charges of spying and an anti-Party label. During the xenophobia of the Cultural Revolution, these charges were revived and some people who had received parcels during the famine were persecuted.

Overseas relatives in Hong Kong sent 6.2 million 2 lb parcels in the first six months of 1962 (equivalent to 5,357 tonnes). The massive outflow overwhelmed the colony's post offices where people stood in line for hours. Hong Kong Chinese were also allowed to visit their relatives again and



bring food parcels, and there were long queues for the train to Guangzhou. The Chinese government extracted as much money as possible from these visitors, levying a 400 per cent duty on the 2 lb packages. Relatives in other parts of the world sent money orders to be used for importing chemical fertilizer. In return their families in China obtained grain coupons. The grain imported in bulk from Canada and Australia had begun to arrive in the cities but its origin was often disguised. As Chi An recounts in *A Mother's Ordeal*: 'Our family received a special issue of ten pounds of wheat flour from the state grain store. The government had put the flour in locally made sacks to disguise its origin but the employees at the store whispered that it was from Canada. It shocked me that the Party, still touting enormous increases in grain production, would import grain from a foreign country – and a hated capitalist one at that.' In Henan, Xinyang peasants could, over thirty years later, still remember how good the Canadian grain tasted.

In Shanghai, the government decided that it was now necessary to regain the confidence even of despised members of the former capitalist classes and sent them on excursions where they were treated to the best food. The city markets began to re-open and peasants were allowed to come into the cities and sell food legally. Albert Belhomme, an American soldier who defected during the Korean War and settled in Jinan, Shandong, described what happened there:

*At first the peasants with grain, vegetables or meat to sell were very timid. They came to the outskirts of the city at two or three in the morning. Transactions were carried on by the light of a match. People bought all kinds of things they didn't usually eat like carrot and turnip tops. Prices were high. As conditions worsened, the peasants became bolder, coming right into the city at daylight. The police gave up trying to stop them. Soon parts of the city were so crowded with pedlars and customers you couldn't ride a bicycle through certain streets.<sup>17</sup>*

Some peasants became rich from this trade but could buy nothing with their paper money. Industrial production had ceased and the shops were often empty. Others were more successful, as Belhomme relates: 'They bought bicycles and even radios in spite of the fact that their villages had no electricity. They also spent huge amounts eating in the "free" restaurants where you could order good meals without ration coupons at high prices. Once in one of those restaurants, I saw a peasant in patched homespun clothes reach into his pocket and pull out a wad of cash that would have choked a horse.'

China also began to open her borders. During the past three years, tens of thousands had repeatedly tried to escape south to Macao and Hong Kong. Those caught were imprisoned, the penalty usually two or three months in a labour camp, but many died in the attempt, their bodies later found drifting in the Pearl River. People said they died because they were too weak to swim the distance, or had been shot by border guards. Then, in the summer of 1962, 250,000 people were suddenly allowed to reach Hong Kong. According to some estimates, altogether 700,000 people in Guangzhou were preparing to leave, some of whom had come from other parts of the country to escape.<sup>18</sup>

In the cities, the worst of the food shortages were over by the autumn of 1962, although people still lived on subsistence rations. In some places many women did not begin to menstruate again until 1965. The state continued to send as many people as possible to the countryside to minimize the problem of collecting and distributing grain. The peasants were understandably reluctant to hand over their grain to the state and for the next few years it was sometimes they who lived better than the city-dwellers, especially if they were able to sell food to the cities. In 1965, just before the Cultural Revolution began, food parcels from abroad were banned.

New policies for China's minority peoples were also launched in 1962. The Panchen Lama was encouraged to draw up his report on the treatment of the Tibetans while Beijing attempted to address their grievances. In the far western province of Xinjiang, tens of thousands of Kazakh nomads were allowed to cross the border and join their relatives in Kazakhstan and other parts of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, none of this changed the fact that Mao was still head of the Communist Party, at the apex of the power structure, although he no longer attended government meetings. Indeed, he seems to have spent much of the first half of 1962 sulking in a villa in Hangzhou. However, at the annual August meeting at the seaside resort of Beidaihe, Mao returned to the political stage with a vengeance. He attacked Liu and Deng by name, shouting furiously: 'You have put the screws on me for a very long time, since 1960, for over two years. Now, for once I am going to put a scare into you.' With a gesture of disgust he reportedly swept the documents on the reform of the communes off the table.<sup>19</sup> Later, he would complain that the rest of the leadership had treated him like 'a dead ancestor' and would accuse Deng Xiaoping of not wanting even to sit near him at meetings.

It is not hard to understand the revulsion Deng and others must have felt towards Mao. The entire Party must have known of the terrible economic damage inflicted on China, even if a full reckoning of the death toll was not made available to all. According to a study by the US Department of Agriculture published in 1988, Mao's Great Leap Forward had caused overall grain yields to fall by 25 per cent, wheat yields by 41 per cent. The production of coarse grains such as sorghum, millet and corn was lower than it had been before 1949. Oil-seed production, the chief source of fats in the Chinese diet, had collapsed by 64 per cent, cotton by 41 per cent and textiles by more than 50 per cent. The number of pigs, the main source of meat in China, had fallen in the four years to 1961 from 146 million to 75 million. The number of draught animals, used to plough fields almost everywhere in China, had fallen drastically too, so that there were half as many donkeys in 1961 as there had been in 1956. At the same time, in the five years from 1957, China had at Mao's urging exported nearly 12 million tonnes of grain as well as record amounts of cotton yarn, cloth, pork, poultry and fruit.<sup>20</sup>

The new policies might have been popular but Mao's supporters were still in place throughout the Party hierarchy. In most of rural China, the power struggle had not been resolved. Instead, there were now 'two lines', and officials followed whichever line suited them. Often, they shifted from one to the other, depending on the local political situation and the prevailing wind from Beijing.

As Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping implemented their reforms, Mao continued to insist that the order of the day was 'Never forget class struggle'. Seemingly incapable of comprehending the scale of the disaster that he had instigated, he continued to act as if he believed the peasants were wholly behind him. The poor and lower-middle-class peasant associations, instrumental in the land reform campaign, were revived and villagers were ordered to attend meetings at which peasants would describe their hard life before 1949. At the same time, just as Stalin had done when he abandoned the New Economic Policy, Mao claimed that rich peasants and landlords had regained power and were rebuilding capitalism.

In the continuing struggle for power and the attempt to root out opponents, Deng Xiaoping launched the 'Four clean ups' movement to purge cadres who had kept grain for themselves while the peasants starved. This had mixed success because Mao launched a counter-political movement – the 'Socialist education campaign' – aimed at targeting cadres who could be accused of practising capitalism. As before, the Party continued to send city-dwellers to the countryside to force peasants to comply with its sometimes contradictory demands. The students and officials who went were often ignorant of the real nature of the famine and baffled by the experience. One student dispatched to a village in Hebei recalled:

*In 1962 I and my fellow students were sent down to the countryside in a movement called 'Consolidating the People's Commune'. I still don't understand what it was about. I think they wanted us to go and be used as cheap labour for the peasants. A gong would wake us up at 4 a.m. and then we would go straight to the fields. It took several hours of walking to get to them. We arrived in the winter and our job was to take*

*compost – fertilizer – to the fields. The stuff was made of human and animal wastes, ash and any other rubbish, and this was to prepare the land for spring sowing. Then, around 9 a.m., we walked back to the village for our soup. We would try and drink as much water as possible because the next meal would not be until around 4 p.m. Even now I can't eat porridge. The memories of that time make me throw up. Then, in the evening, we had to take part in meetings and everyone was supposed to talk about how to improve the communes. We all felt very tired and no one spoke. For hours twenty or thirty of us would squat on a kang feeling angry and tired. There was no electricity, just a flickering oil lamp. The cadre would ask people to speak but nothing happened for hours, we were all so tired. Some people just slept. Then, at 11.30 p.m., the cadre allowed us to leave. The peasants hated our presence there and we had little contact with them.*

Mao was determined to revive the communes and abolish the contract responsibility system. The rehabilitation of Peng Dehuai that had been prepared was thrown out. The new agricultural ministry was dismantled and its leader, Deputy Premier Deng Zihui, dismissed, Mao declaring that 'Marxism will vanish if we implement his household responsibility system'. He went on to announce that China was now ready for a new Great Leap Forward and justified himself by saying that 'Good men who make mistakes are quite different from men who follow the capitalist road.'

From August 1962 until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the split within the Party was hard to disguise and it spread through every level of the bureaucracy. When Mao finally recovered complete authority in 1966 his agricultural policies once again became law, but in the meantime each side stood by their respective policies. This meant that village leaders had a choice of whether to follow Mao's 'Ten points on agriculture' or Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping's 'Ten points on agriculture'. Recovery from the famine was hindered by battles between the two factions as each tried to oust the other's followers from positions of power in the countryside. One interviewee recalled what it was like when he became part of a rural work team:

*When I was a student I was sent to this village in Zhouxian county, Hebei. It was 1964 and Mao was trying to prove to Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi that their methods were wrong, that the peasants were corrupt, although production was rising. So we had to go to production team leaders and interrogate them. We had to make one confess to falsifying figures, to hiding grain and cheating the government. Then we could say we – our team – did our work the best because we had caught a big fish.*

Even high-ranking Communist officials took part in local power struggles. One known example involved Zhao Ziyang, then the leader of Guangdong province, who tried to oust Chen Hua, the Maoist leader of Shengshi brigade, forty miles south of the provincial capital.<sup>21</sup> Chen was a national labour model whom Mao had received in person, but in the late summer of 1964 he stood accused of rape, corruption, extortion and 'suppression of the masses'. A work team led by Zhao Ziyang finally persuaded two frightened old peasants to come forward and testify against Chen. However, once the team had gone, Chen had the two peasant informers beaten up. They then wrote a letter of protest to Zhao who sent a second work team. When they in turn left, the two peasants were beaten up again. A third work team was dispatched but this time headed by no less a person than Liu Shaoqi's wife, Wang Guangmei who, somewhat bizarrely, turned up in disguise. At this point Chen Hua decided the game was up and boarded a boat to flee to Hong Kong. However, he was caught and soon afterwards died horribly, electrocuted by a high-voltage transformer at the brigade headquarters. The authorities said that he had committed suicide.

That year Wang Guangmei also turned up incognito at another commune called Taoyuan, in Hebei province. There she gathered evidence of the success of her husband's agricultural policies. Mao ridiculed this research and countered it by promoting his own model village, Dazhai, in Shanxi province. Chen Yonggui, its peasant leader, claimed that by applying Mao's ideas he had performed miracles and had turned a hillside wasteland into a paradise. As with all such model communes and villages, the claims were entirely fraudulent. Dazhai's 'miracle' had been the result of a massive injection of state funds: as a model it was meaningless. Nevertheless, Mao presented Dazhai's achievements as 'proof' that his ideas worked. Liu Shaoqi repeatedly tried to discredit Mao by sending in work teams, each consisting of up to 70 cadres, to gather evidence that its claims of high grain yields were bogus. Only in 1980 was it finally admitted in the *People's Daily* that Dazhai had accepted millions of dollars in aid and the help of thousands of soldiers, and that in fact its grain production had declined year by year and Chen Yonggui had executed 141 people during the mid-1960s.

Unbelievably, even in Xinyang the Maoists were able to make a comeback.<sup>22</sup> After 1962, new cadres were assigned to take over from those responsible for the huge death toll. A middle-aged PLA veteran, Wang Zhengang, was appointed to run Gushi county. He began by organizing the delivery of Canadian relief grain because the peasants were too weak to labour in the fields and grow food. The *san zi yi bao* policies were implemented and the peasants were given a plot to grow food as they wished. The markets were reopened, as were schools, and Wang set up orphanages. Nonetheless, the political campaigns and purges instigated by Mao continued. Inspectors arrived and charged local cadres with under-reporting grain harvests to keep back food supplies. Peasants were summoned to accuse the very cadres who had saved them when they were on the brink of death. Wang, however, survived and was promoted to prefectural Party Secretary and moved to the city of Xinyang.

In 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution to destroy those 'Party persons in power taking the capitalist road' and the entire province of Henan was torn apart. In this civil war, each side recruited Red Guards in the towns. One group, the Henan Rebel Headquarters, supported Mao, while their opponents supported Liu Shaoqi, naming themselves the February Second Faction after a strike Liu had led before 1949. In the summer of 1967, the Maoists went to Xinyang, seized Wang and brought him back to Gushi. There, in the main courtroom, Red Guards screamed abuse at him and interrogated him until he 'confessed'. He was accused of betraying socialism and of practising capitalism. When he was broken, the Red Guards announced that he had committed suicide by hanging himself and published a photograph showing his corpse with its tongue hanging out. As loudspeakers broadcast his crimes, the peasants in the villages who had been so passive during the famine became enraged and thousands came to Gushi. There, they surrounded the Red Guards and began beating them to death. Dozens were killed and the rest forced to don white mourning clothes and to crawl across the dirt to pay their respects in front of Wang's grave. Until 1993, this spot just outside Gushi remained a place of pilgrimage on Qing Ming, the festival at which the Chinese honour the dead. On such days, the peasants brought offerings of food and let off fireworks in his honour. (In 1994 his grave was moved to make way for a new Christian church and apartment blocks.)

The same scenes were repeated all over China. In effect, the Cultural Revolution was nothing more than a purge of those who had been responsible for ending the famine, a device used by Mao to restore his authority, much as Stalin had done after the Ukrainian famine. It began with an attack on the play 'Hai Rui Dismissed from Office' and went on to target all those who had criticized the Great Leap Forward, defended Peng Dehuai and blamed Mao. Its chief target was Liu Shaoqi, who was so popular with the peasants that in some places they had begun to call him 'chairman'. Mao tried to whip up a campaign of hatred against Liu even in his home province of Hunan. Liang Heng, a former Hunanese Red Guard, describes in *Son of the Revolution* how, on arriving in a town in Hunan, 'I saw to my horror that in every doorway there hung a corpse! It looked like some kind of eerie mass suicide. Moments later I realised that the twilight had turned straw effigies of Liu Shaoqi into dead flesh.'

A bitterly worded propaganda document accused Liu of being a 'fanatical advocate of the rich peasant economy'. His 'sinister' policies were, it

said, ‘drawn from the rubbish heap of his forerunners Bernstein, Kautsky, Bukharin and the like’. His household responsibility system was an ‘evil’ device for the ‘restoration of capitalism’ and amounted to an incitement to cannibalism: ‘These are the cries of a bloodsucker and in them we can discern the greed and ruthlessness of the exploiting classes, the rural capitalist forces, in their vain attempt to strangle socialism. From first to last this is the bourgeois philosophy of man-eat-man.’<sup>23</sup>

Liu was arrested, interrogated, tortured and then left to die half-naked and forgotten in a cellar in Kaifeng, Henan. Peng Dehuai was treated no better. Lin Biao had him taken to a stadium in Beijing where he was made to kneel before an audience of 40,000 soldiers. Then he was put in a cell where he was not permitted to sit down or go to the toilet and was subjected to incessant interrogations. He finally died in prison in 1973.

Many other leading figures who can be credited with saving the country by ending the famine met with an equally merciless death. One of the first victims was the writer Deng Tuo who died on 18 May 1966, supposedly by his own hand. Two days later, Kang Sheng decided that he would profit further from his victim’s death and ordered his agents to raid Deng’s home and remove his collection of antiques and paintings which he wanted for himself.<sup>24</sup> Wu Han, the author of the play about Hai Rui, died of medical neglect in 1969: his wife, daughter and brother were also persecuted to death.

A few opponents of Mao survived. Deng Xiaoping, condemned as ‘the number two capitalist roader’ and sent to the countryside in Jiangxi, managed to escape death, though it is not clear why. Chen Yun wisely dropped out of sight from the end of 1962. Mao’s doctor Li Zhisui recounts how Mao’s personal secretary, Tian Jiaying, secretly stopped a document in which Mao explicitly condemned Chen Yun as ‘a bourgeois leaning to the right’. In Guangdong, Zhao Ziyang was seized and beaten by Red Guards who charged him with introducing the *san zi yi bao* policies and with being ‘an apologist for rich peasants’. He survived, perhaps because Mao recalled his help in early 1959 when he started the anti-hiding and dividing grain campaign. Hu Yaobang also managed to escape retribution but spent six months labouring as a peasant in what was called a May 7th Cadre School. This was of all places in Xinyang, near Luoshan, and has since become Prison Farm No. 51.

## *Mao's Failure and His Legacy*

‘There are comrades who day in day out talk about the Mao Zedong Thoughts, forgetting, as they do so, the fundamental Marxist concept of the Chairman and his basic method which is to seek the truth from facts.’ Deng Xiaoping, 1978

For twenty years after the famine China stagnated. The population grew rapidly but little new was built. The airport in every county, like the electricity, the telephones, the cars and the roads that Mao had promised the peasants in 1958, never materialized. In fact, over the next two decades, China managed to complete the construction of only one new railway line. In the countryside, people did not starve but living standards never regained the levels seen in the 1950s. After the famine, Mao ruled for another fourteen years but remained obsessed with justifying his Great Leap Forward and rooting out those whom he felt had betrayed him. Huge numbers were killed or imprisoned in the Cultural Revolution: how many is still not known, but the victims ran into the tens of millions.

In launching the Cultural Revolution, Mao organized his own army just as he had threatened to do at the Lushan summit. These were the urban youth who enlisted as Red Guards and worshipped him as a god. Under his auspices, the Red Guards raided the army's munitions factories and armouries to equip themselves with machine guns, and in places even with tanks, and then turned them against the Party leadership. Why Liu Shaoqi and his fellow leaders were unable to stop Mao is one of the most extraordinary and puzzling aspects of the famine, for Party members knew that Mao had allowed tens of millions to starve to death and that his Great Leap Forward had been a monumental failure. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the Party's decision to keep the famine secret. Mao was only able to call upon the Red Guards to do his bidding because they, out of the whole population, knew the least about his crimes. In the climate of fear that pervaded the country, parents could not bring themselves to tell their children what had happened. Mao wanted the young to distrust and betray the older generation and praised those who exposed their parents. These so-called ‘educated youths’ would not find out what had happened in the countryside until Mao dispensed with them after 1969 and they were sent to live among the peasants.

As a group, the peasants did not participate in the Cultural Revolution and rural youths rarely left their homes to join the bands of Red Guards creating havoc around the country. Had the peasants answered Mao's call to anarchy, the economy would have collapsed but no peasant wanted to abandon his fields and go through another great famine. The Cultural Revolution did, however, leave its mark on the countryside. In some places, the Party further impoverished the peasants by levying an additional 5 per cent tax to pay for the cost of organizing these political campaigns and the accommodation of the Red Guards. And some peasants used the political chaos that followed to turn on the cadres responsible for the worst atrocities during the famine, sometimes simply publicly humiliating them but sometimes beating them to death. As in Xinyang, peasants tried to protect those local cadres who had ended the famine and were now attacked for restoring capitalism by introducing Liu Shaoqi's policies.

Though the countryside was largely unaffected by the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's triumphant return to power was nevertheless a disaster for the peasants. The renewed effort to build a new society and make new men out of the starving and ragged peasantry meant a return to collective farming and the discouragement of any kind of private initiative. Mao's vision of a rural Utopia, embodied by the Dazhai model, was revived as if the famine had never taken place and teams of ‘Dazhai inspectors’ patrolled the communes to ensure that Mao's failed agricultural policies were closely followed. As one peasant from a mountainous region put it: ‘Really, for us the famine lasted twenty years.’ Though mass famine deaths ended after 1961, hunger remained endemic. Most peasants went without basic commodities such as cooking oil, meat, fruit and tea. One intellectual sent to work in the countryside of northern Henan from 1969 to 1973 recalled what life was like: ‘Even at that time the peasants were not eating wheat. Their main food was still dried sweet potato and, twice a day, this was all they ate. They lived in complete destitution. No house had any doors left, all the wood had been taken away.’

Not until after Mao's death in 1976 did per capita grain production reach the level of 1957, and in the early 1970s food production actually fell once more to levels seen during the famine. As a Chinese expert wrote in 1980: ‘For nearly twenty years from the Second Five-year Plan period (1958-62) to the downfall of the Gang of Four in 1976 there was little or no rise in living standards. Each peasant's annual grain ration remained at around 400 lbs of unprocessed grain... and consumption of vegetable oils, eggs, and aquatic products, according to our estimates, did not return to the 1957 level.’<sup>1</sup> Not until 1978 did the peasants eat as much as they had in the mid-1950s.

Up until Mao's death, China claimed that grain production had kept pace with the growth in population but the figures were falsified. Peasants grew sweet potatoes, the easiest and most reliable crop to plant, and local officials, under pressure to show that Mao's policies worked, calculated grain harvests by weighing the sweet potatoes. Since a sweet potato crop from one field weighs five times as much as wheat grown in the same field they appeared to meet their quotas. Yet once the sweet potatoes were dried, they shrank to a tenth of their original weight and even then were no substitute for good and nourishing wheat or rice. This type of fraud was widespread and villagers often drew up a false set of figures to show officials who came from outside to inspect their work. The system functioned but it barely enabled the cities to be fed and the peasants' diet was worse than it had been before the revolution. A study by the World Bank in 1985 concluded that peasants in equally poor countries had until recently a considerably richer and more varied diet than had the Chinese. Even in 1982, by which time the Chinese diet had become considerably more varied, ‘the direct per capita consumption of grain [in China] is about 209 kg per year and is among the world's highest and exceeds that in India by 60 per cent and Indonesia by more than 30 per cent’.<sup>2</sup>

In the years after the famine, the peasants not only ate a poor and monotonous diet, they also lived in the same broken-down mud huts. Few were able to replace the wooden windows and doors and the household goods taken away during the Great Leap Forward. The Party outlawed all carpentry and handicrafts which were not undertaken by state-run units. Peasants in poor agricultural areas, who in the past had supplemented their income by carpentry, basket weaving and dozens of other trades, now had only farming on which to rely. Supplies of factory-made goods, even clothing, were often not available and many peasants were dressed in rags or in garments made of straw and grass. For years after the famine, the peasants lived little better than their draught animals, indeed they often had to pull their ploughs themselves.

Mao's policies stifled recovery from the famine. In the name of egalitarianism, no one was allowed to be seen to prosper from activities such as raising poultry or selling vegetables, even if they were permitted, without attracting censure and punishment as ‘rich peasants’. Peasants could not, for instance, raise more than one or two pigs per household. Nor could they sell these animals privately. Anyone caught slaughtering a pig without permission would be sentenced to one or even three years in prison. The penalty for buying or selling oxen (regarded as a means of production) was even higher – five or six years' imprisonment. Peasant militia also patrolled the villages to stop the villagers from indulging in the most harmless



pursuits if they smacked of bourgeois individualism. The small pleasures of life, even playing cards, became crimes against the state.

The peasants were also left to struggle with another legacy of the Great Leap Forward, farming land that had often been ruined by deep ploughing, by ill-conceived irrigation projects or by growing unsuitable crops. In north China, the fertility of some 7.41 million acres of soil had been destroyed by wells and irrigation schemes which had caused the water table to rise. When the water evaporated from the sodden fields, a damaging deposit of salts and alkalis was left.<sup>3</sup> And the crudely built dams and irrigation works that they had created at great cost proved worse than useless, and in some cases even fatal – the collapse in August 1975 of two dams in Henan built during the Great Leap Forward has already been discussed in [Chapter 5](#).

Despite the evident failure of the Great Leap Forward irrigation schemes, peasants continued to be sent to labour on still greater and more pointless projects, the most famous of which was the Red Flag Canal in northern Henan's Linxian county. There, tens of thousands toiled without machinery in the late 1960s to re-route a river by tunnelling a channel through a mountain and then along a bed built on the side of steep cliffs. Unaided by engineers the peasants built 134 tunnels and 150 aqueducts, and moved enough earth to build a road 42,480 miles long. Aside from these showcase marvels, peasants had to terrace mountainsides all over the countryside, as had been done at Dazhai, and since grain was the only agricultural product that mattered, peasants had to grow it irrespective of natural conditions. Finally, to open more land for grain, forests were cut down and lakes drained.

The reluctant peasants had also once again to follow the eight-point charter drawn up by Mao in 1958 (see [Chapter 5](#)). In *China: Science Walks on Two Legs*, the two American authors record how they were taken to Dazhai in 1974 and told of the benefits of using animal and human wastes instead of chemical fertilizer. Their hosts talked, too, of the advantages of close planting, the new hybrid species they had created and the innovative agricultural tools they had built.<sup>4</sup> Many others were taken around Dazhai and books poured forth about its success and the heroism of its peasant leader, Chen Yonggui. As late as 1976, Penguin Books published *China: The Quality of Life* by Rewi Alley and Wilfred Burchett which lavished praise on Dazhai's wonders.

In the real world, the peasants resorted to passive opposition and evasion in order to feed themselves, as the journalist and dissident Liu Binyan records:

*The starving peasants resorted to the only legal form of protest in China – a work slowdown – and they would continue to do this for the next thirty years. Every morning and every afternoon, after we set out to work collectively, we would sit down and chat for half an hour upon reaching the fields. After starting work, we often stood still leaning on our hoes and chatting for another half-hour. Then, when the regular break arrived, the peasants would take out their pipes and smoke for an hour.*<sup>5</sup>

The peasants still talked about their hope that one day they would get their own land back, or that at least the Party would relent so that they could return to the policies of 1961 and 1962. 'They knew that if they could only divide the land once more, they would all eat well again,' said one writer who spent time in a village in Sichuan. In Anhui, a rural cadre told me that when he was obliged to go round the villages urging the peasants to grow more grain, they would tell him that the only way forward was to go back to the *ze ren tian*. In some places, the peasants secretly continued to farm the land they had divided up in that period or grew food on land in the hills, far away from official view. Some peasants even formed secret societies to fight for the return of their land. In one township in north-western Sichuan, a group of peasants banded together in what they called 'The Chinese People's Freedom Party'. In 1972, its twelve leaders were arrested and executed as counterrevolutionaries. It has been claimed that such movements were not uncommon and that they often had the backing of village-level cadres.

Meanwhile, the majority waited for Mao to die and hoped that, when he did, the communes would be abandoned. After his death in the autumn of 1976, his successor Hua Guofeng was determined to continue with Mao's policies but the peasants secretly started to share out the land. Anhui peasants say this began in 1977, and by the following year the Party had little choice but to go along with it. In 1978, 200 million peasants, or one in four, were not getting enough to eat and productivity had fallen to levels lower than during the Han dynasty. In 1978, an Anhui peasant grew 1,597 lbs of grain in a year, less than the average yield 2,000 years earlier when peasants had managed 2,200 lbs.

Official Communist Party history records that the first peasants to challenge Mao's policies were the Xiao Gang production team of Li Yuan commune in Fengyang county. The daring of this village derived from its experiences in the Great Leap Forward when 60 starved to death, 76 fled and only 39 people and one ox survived. The villagers were resolved not to suffer again, and on 24 November 1978, they attended a meeting organized by the production chief, Yen Chungang. The heads of eighteen households, most of whom shared the same surname as Yen, signed an agreement, solemnized by affixing their thumb print, under which they vowed to keep their acts secret. If discovery led to the arrest of the leaders, the rest promised to raise their children. The peasants then secretly split the production team's land amongst themselves under the household responsibility system or *bao chan dao hu*, a variant of Zeng Xisheng's *ze ren tian*. Soon, they were being held up as a national model for the whole country and later the original contract was enshrined behind a glass case in the Museum of Revolutionary History in Beijing.<sup>6</sup>

An alternative version of events suggests that the abandonment of the communes was instigated by Deng Xiaoping. One of his followers, Wan Li, soon after being promoted to Party Secretary of Anhui following Mao's death, issued six guidelines relaxing restrictions on private farming and trading. Peasants could now grow vegetables on 3/10ths of a *mu* instead of 2/10ths and did not have to pay taxes on wheat and oil-bearing plants grown on private plots. Deng Xiaoping, then Vice-Chairman of the Communist Party, gave his blessing to what were known as the *Anhui liu tiao*, or Anhui's Six Measures, and suggested that Zhao Ziyang, who had been appointed to take charge of Sichuan, should follow suit. The latter soon issued further measures of reform and even led a group of commune bosses on a tour of Western Europe to introduce them to the marvels of commercial farming.

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress at the close of 1978 is now hailed as the beginning of a new era. At that meeting Deng was able to oust Hua Guofeng and begin to destroy Mao's communes. Wan Li, in a speech entitled 'Several key questions to be solved in agriculture', mounted a fierce attack on the failure of the communes in Anhui and ridiculed Dazhai. Cautiously, a few provincial leaders began to dismantle the system of collective agriculture that the peasants had lived under for a quarter of a century.<sup>7</sup>

The dismantlement of the first commune took place in August 1979 amid the greatest secrecy at Guanghan, a town forty miles from Chengdu, Sichuan. Nothing was announced in the press for at least another year and news of the daring act only became known when a Japanese journalist reported it. Nevertheless it took years for others to follow suit. In Sichuan, many communes waited until 1984 before daring to dissolve the system, and even in Anhui some places, such as Feixi county, did not allocate the land to households until 1985.

Mao's communes cost China dear. At a time when the agricultural productivity of other Asian countries was increasing in leaps and bounds, the Chinese peasant was hamstrung. Between 1960 and 1980, according to a World Bank study, the productivity of Japanese peasants rose twenty-fold and that of South Koreans sixty-fold. Even in 1980, Chinese peasants were half as productive as those in Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand.

Chinese leaders constantly reiterate the fact that China feeds over 20 per cent of the world's population on 7 per cent of its arable land, and the shortage of arable land is used as the excuse for rural poverty. But on a per capita basis, China has more farming land than either South Korea or Japan,

as the following table makes clear.<sup>8</sup>

	Population density per hectare	Population density per hectare of arable land
China	1.05	10
South Korea	3.89	17.3
Japan	3.15	23.9

Had Mao not reversed the initial redistribution of land after 1949 by establishing the collectives, China would not now be lagging so far behind. Peasant smallholders provided a good base for economic take-off in those countries which the United States dominated after Japan's defeat in 1945. In Taiwan, the Sino-American Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction set about boosting food output and winning the political loyalty of the peasants by giving them land. This resulted in the 1953 Land to the Tillers Act by which the amount of land cultivated by tenant farmers dropped from 40 per cent to 15 per cent. The Act forced many disenfranchised landowners to start up their own businesses which now form the mainstay of the island's economy. In Japan the Americans were similarly responsible for the 1952 Agricultural Land Law which consolidated and continued the break-up of large estates begun in 1946.

Under Mao, China also failed to capitalize on the new farming methods developed in the rest of the world. Cheap chemical fertilizers, new varieties of wheat and rice, and the use of plastic sheeting to extend the growing season all helped spur farmers in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to reap once unimaginably high yields. Small so-called walking tractors, cheap enough for a household to buy and use for tilling and transport, vastly increased the household farmer's productivity. In Mao's China the peasants were stuck with large and unwieldy Soviet-style tractors.

After Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the peasants exploited these innovations with enthusiasm. The amount of chemical fertilizer applied in China doubled between 1977 and 1981 and had tripled by 1986. Grain production jumped from 286 million tonnes at Mao's death in 1976 to 407 million tonnes in 1984. By the mid-1980s China was once again a net food exporter. Peasants no longer subsisted on sweet potatoes but could now afford to use cooking oil and eat meat, vegetables, fruit and fish.

Though there is no doubt that Deng's reforms were of great significance, in fact they consisted of nothing more than the abandonment of a system which had failed catastrophically twenty years earlier, and indeed which had failed in the Soviet Union two decades before that. Deng must share the responsibility for ignoring the lessons of both these earlier failures. His reforms have consisted largely of returning the peasants to the situation they were in before the Communist revolution, and indeed for centuries before. The peasants are once again small farmers – although this time all land is nominally owned by the state – obliged to pay an annual grain tax.

To call Deng's policies reforms is in a sense a misnomer and it is also becoming clear that they have not solved China's Malthusian crisis. The Chinese are still confronted with a burgeoning population and hence the threat of famine, which may prove to be Mao's most bitter legacy. When the Communists fought the Nationalists during the 1940s, they were able to promise the 500 million peasants that they would be rewarded with a plot of land (its size varied from place to place) large enough to support a family. Thirty years later, Deng had the same amount of land to redistribute (or perhaps less given the environmental destruction that had occurred in the interim), but the rural population had nearly doubled. The post-1979 redistribution of land gave a temporary boost to the Party's popularity but it is still faced with the almost insurmountable problem of finding employment for a growing surplus of labour in the countryside. Throughout China's history, dynasties have been overthrown by landless and frustrated peasants who have risen up in revolt. Without more land to placate the peasantry, the Party now faces the possibility of its own overthrow. The growth in grain production has slowed since 1987 and output actually fell for the first time in 1994. In 1995, the Party panicked over a report by Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute in America which said that China is losing her ability to feed herself. By the year 2000 there could be a shortfall of 40 million tonnes. In just over fifty years, China's population will reach 1.6 billion and China may well need to import more grain than the rest of the world can supply. The last famine may, officially at least, be forgotten but the threat of another great famine will haunt future generations.

And what of Mao's Utopian vision of the future for Chinese peasants? In some ways, his fantasies are coming true although for reasons entirely contrary to his beliefs. In increasing numbers the peasants do have access to the marvels of twentieth-century technology. They have new houses made of brick and tiles and equipped with electricity and television. Their fields now produce three times as much grain per *mu* as in 1960. Mechanization has arrived with walking tractors and threshing machines. Chinese pigs now grow to four times the weight they did in 1960 and modern science is creating giant vegetables and genetically engineered hybrids. Mao's opposition to chemical fertilizers is now fashionable and foreign agronomists recommend natural fertilizers. It is not hard to imagine that if the famine is left out of the history books, Mao could continue to be worshipped as a great peasant emperor whose vision transformed China into a modern state.



## How Many Died?

‘Any society that is alive is a society with a *history*.’ Vaclav Havel

China has never officially acknowledged that the famine took place nor published an estimate of the death toll. The results of any internal investigations are a state secret and no public discussion of the famine is permitted.

Western experts made the first estimates of the death toll in the early 1980s, nearly a quarter of a century after the famine had taken place, and these calculations are only educated guesses, carried out on the basis of limited information. Yet given that the number of victims of the Holocaust and the Ukrainian famine are still being debated even though far more is known about them, such uncertainty over the death toll in China is hardly surprising. Moreover, in China the Party responsible for the famine is still in power and venerates the memory of Mao. Even in Russia, where the Communists have lost power, it is still proving difficult to determine how many died in Stalin’s purges, the famines or the Second World War. Nor have the internal records of Mao’s regime been scrutinized by an occupying power in the way the Allies were able to examine those of Nazi Germany.

However, reaching a reliable figure about a famine which lasted for years and extended over such a large country would be difficult even if China were to open all her archives. Many records were lost during the Cultural Revolution and a great deal of other evidence has been deliberately destroyed. In addition, only three censuses were taken in China between 1949 and 1982, one in 1953, another in 1964 and the third in 1982. And, as will be seen, data from that of 1964 must be treated with considerable caution.

During the Great Leap Forward, the State Statistical Bureau, set up in 1952 and modelled on its Soviet equivalent, simply did not function. Professional statisticians were relegated to other work and were only reappointed in July 1961. And only in the following year, on the instructions of Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, were plans drawn up for the establishment of a powerful, centralized and unified statistics system. At the same time, Party and government departments were forbidden to change statistical figures.<sup>1</sup>

Provisional regulations governing statistical work were issued in 1963 but the newly reconstituted bureau functioned only for another four years or so. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Sihua, head of the State Statistical Bureau, was arrested and accused of implementing a revisionist line, ‘seizing power from the Party’ and ‘asserting his independence’. At the same time, large quantities of material from the bureau were burnt. Wang had been in charge of organizing China’s second national population census completed in 1964. The census had been conducted amid such secrecy that the outside world was unaware of it, and Mao refused to publish the results. Details of the 1964 census were only published in 1980. Thus for nearly a quarter of a century there was an effective blackout on all Chinese population statistics.<sup>2</sup>

These circumstances parallel those during collectivization and the ensuing famine in the Soviet Union. Stalin had ordered a new census in 1937 but its results were never released and lay buried in the central national archives for half a century. The director of the Census Bureau, O. A. Kvitkin, was dismissed and later shot. Stalin had estimated that the Soviet Union had a population of around 170 million people. However, the census itself counted only 162 million people, clearly showing that 7 million or more people had starved to death in the Ukraine and the northern Caucasus.

The parallels with China do not end there. Researchers have discovered that the Soviet Central Office of Statistics produced two sets of demographic statistics, one for internal use and one for publication. During the Mao era, China appears to have done much the same, at least as far as meteorological data is concerned. During the Great Leap Forward, the Central Meteorological Office continued to function accurately but the information it produced was restricted to senior levels of the Party. The meteorologists reported that there was no unusually bad weather or natural disasters in 1959, 1960 or 1961; indeed the weather was rather good. However, the official media reported claims by Mao and others that China had in this period experienced the worst natural disasters for a century. Official news reports even quoted experts as saying that China’s climate had changed. In fact, the worst years since 1949 have been 1954 and 1980 when there was neither a severe grain shortage nor a nationwide famine.<sup>3</sup>

However, even if one is prepared to accept that the statistics released by China after 1980 were undoctored, there are doubts as to whether in the midst of a ruthless political struggle, an accurate census was taken in 1964. The count must have been made at the provincial level with the co-operation of the local Party organization and the results passed on to the centre only with the approval of the provincial Party Secretaries. In many provinces, the same officials who were responsible for the famine were still in power and would have had every reason to censor damaging information. In Sichuan, for example, Li Jingquan was still in power in 1964: the census would have revealed his responsibility for 7-9 million deaths. Nonetheless, the data from the 1964 census is crucial to making a proper estimate of the death toll for, without it, one is faced with a gap of twenty-nine years between the first census in 1953 and the third in 1982.

China began to publish a flood of statistical and demographic data after 1980, when the State Statistical Bureau was re-established and the country’s few remaining statisticians returned from long years of physical labour in the countryside. It is now possible, using the data from 1953, 1964 and 1982, to track the progress of each age cohort from census to census and therefore establish how many of those born in 1950 survived until 1964 and then 1982. However, two factors in particular hinder a demographer from making a definitive study of the death toll during the famine – internal migration and the number of children who were born and died between 1958 and 1962.

In a famine people flee their homes and often do not return, but a census count does not show whether they have starved to death or whether they have moved away and failed to register elsewhere. Census figures for Shanghai, for example, show that 950,000 people left Shanghai between 1953 and 1964, but they do not reveal what happened to these people or where they went. During the famine, uncounted numbers fled the worst-hit regions, over 10 million settling in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia alone.

The other great challenge is to try and guess how many children were born during the famine years and, of these, how many died. This is not revealed by the 1953 and 1964 censuses although experts can make educated guesses based on birth rates and infant mortality rates before and after the famine. On the other hand, pre-famine trends are not a strong guide because it is clear that fewer babies are born in a famine. Many women stop ovulating altogether, and if they do give birth, they produce less milk and infant mortality rises sharply. One expert has calculated that Anhui suffered a fertility crisis for as long as two years during the famine but obviously the scale of the crisis varied from province to province.<sup>4</sup> With a population the size of China’s, the margin for error is fairly high. Under normal conditions, China might in the late 1950s and early 1960s have seen around 25 million births a year. Even in famine conditions, the number of births might still have been 14 million a year. Thus in the four years from 1958 to 1962, the number of births could have ranged from a low of 56 million to a maximum of 100 million.

The censuses are not the sole guide to calculating the death toll in China because the local authorities also maintain registers of births and deaths. Given the rationing system which existed during this period, a careful record would have been made at times of the number of mouths to feed. On the other hand, at the height of the famine in the countryside, no one was burying the dead, let alone recording the number of deaths. The births and deaths of small children, in particular, would often have passed almost unnoticed. Nor would officials have kept track of those who fled and managed to survive or of those who died on the roads. And there is another, final question-mark about Chinese figures: how were the inmates of the labour camps and prisons recorded? And the millions in the armed forces? Generally, both groups are excluded from provincial population figures but during the famine there were perhaps as many as 10 million prisoners and the death rate in the camps was exceptionally high, on average 20 per cent and often far higher.

In the early 1980s, Dr Judith Banister undertook a major investigation of China’s population statistics which was published in *China’s Changing Population*. Taking all the above factors into account, she reached the following conclusion:

*Assuming that without the Great Leap Forward policies and experiences China would have maintained its claimed 1957 death rate of 10.8 during the years 1958-1961, the official data imply that those four years saw over 15 million excess deaths attributable to the Great Leap Forward in combination with poor weather conditions. The computerized reconstruction of China’s population trends utilized in this book, which assumes under-reporting of deaths in 1957, as well as in all the famine years, results in an estimated 30 million excess deaths during 1958-1961.*<sup>5</sup>

This figure, arrived at in 1984, is the most reliable estimate we have but it is not the only one.

While China has never formally rejected this total or put forward an alternative, a wealth of statistical information has been published which amounts to quasi-official recognition that millions did die of famine. One such work, *Contemporary Chinese Population* published in 1988, goes further by explicitly stating that the official data disguises the extent of the death toll. Official figures show that between 1959 and 1961, the population fell by 13.48 million but the authors say: ‘The problem is that there are false figures and 6.03 million people during the three years of difficulty were not taken into account when the calculations were made... If we take this into account, the death rate in 1960 should be 1 per cent higher at 3.85 per cent. So out of a population of 500 million, there were 19.5 million deaths in the countryside.’<sup>6</sup> The authors also substantiate anecdotal evidence that large numbers of girls were allowed to die or were killed during the famine. According to the 1964 census, 0.5 per cent more boys than girls aged 5-9 and 0.4 per cent more males than females aged 9-14 years survived the famine. Generally, even in normal times a higher proportion of male infants than female infants survive in China but the 1982 census indicates that the normal difference is only about 0.1 per cent. This means that during the famine 4.7 million fewer girls survived than would have done so in normal years. In other words, nearly a quarter of the 19.5 million famine victims were peasant girls, who appear to have been deliberately allowed to starve to death or were killed by their parents.

Articles published by some experts in China and by exiled dissidents claim that the death toll is far higher even than Banister’s estimate. In 1993, a Chinese scholar writing under the pen-name Jin Hui published an article in a Shanghai academic journal, *Society*, which was later withdrawn. The author looked at inconsistencies in official statistics on birth and death rates, sex ratios, rural and urban populations and provincial and national figures, and concluded that the figures had been falsified to hide a death toll of at least 40 million. Unfortunately, it also true that Chinese statistics about any subject are rarely internally consistent so it is hard to know how significant these discrepancies are. Whether or not this figure of 40 million is to be trusted, it is now used, almost casually, by various authors inside China who lump deaths and the reduction in births together. Cong Jin of the National Defence University writes in *China 1949-1989: The Zig-zag Development Era* that ‘From 1959 to 1961 the abnormal deaths plus the reduction of births reached about 40 million.’<sup>7</sup> Another book, *Disasters of Leftism in China* by Wen Yu, published in 1993, claims that ‘from 1959 to 1961, the abnormal deaths plus the reduction of births reached altogether more than 40 million with direct economic losses of 120 billion yuan’.<sup>8</sup>

The estimates of American demographers are also challenged by Chen Yizi, a senior Chinese Party official who fled to America after the crackdown that followed the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations. After 1979, Chen played an important role in the rural reforms as a member of a think-tank called the *Tigaisuo* or System Reform Institute patronized by Zhao Ziyang, then Premier and later Party General Secretary. The new Chinese leadership wanted to find out what had really happened under Mao, and one of the institute’s first tasks was to draw up a picture of rural China. Chen was part of a large team of 200 officials who visited every province and examined internal Party documents and records. The institute’s report concluded that between 43 and 46 million people had died during the famine and several sources said that an even larger figures of 50 and 60 million deaths were cited at internal meetings of senior Party officials.

The institute’s report has never been released but in an interview Chen recalled the death toll for a number of provinces:

Henan	7.8 million
Anhui	8 million
Shandong	7.5 million
Sichuan	9 million
Qinghai	900,000

Thus, in these five provinces alone, 33.2 million people died. Chen argues that these figures are reliable because each province compiled detailed statistics on its population. In normal times, Chinese local officials keep records of household registration and these were particularly important when the commune system operated because with all food rationed, great care was taken in counting the number of mouths.

That such detailed records were kept is clear from the report on Fengyang county in Anhui. Such figures were also used when the Party compiled reports on the famine in each province at the end of 1960; and in places like Gansu officials kept a record of famine deaths as well as the number of mouths to feed. However, while it is clear that Beijing was aware of the scale of the disaster, the reliability of such figures is hard to ascertain. In addition, there is an added complication, because evidence suggests that the Party often produced different versions of the same report. Lower figures were released to lower-ranking officials. Until these internal reports are made public, we cannot be sure that they exist or, if they do, whether they take into account such factors as internal migration or include normal deaths in the totals.

From a moral perspective, the debate is meaningless. Whether 30 or over 40 million perished, China managed to hide the largest famine in history for twenty years. In terms of sheer numbers, no other event comes close to this. Until the Great Leap Forward, the largest famine on record took place in China between 1876 and 1879 when 9-13 million died.

In other great historical famines, a higher proportion of the population died than in China in 1958-61. At the start of the great Irish potato famine in

1845, Ireland had a population of about 8.5 million of whom around 1 million died of hunger and 1.5 million emigrated. Most historians recognize that the Irish famine was caused by a blight which destroyed the potato harvest on which the population depended for most of its food. Relief efforts were undermined by the slowness of communications and transport, and when grain was shipped from North America it did not relieve the hunger. The Irish economy was so dependent on the potato that it was not equipped to process the grain for human consumption. Indeed, before the famine bread was seldom seen and ovens virtually unknown. Even so, the British government still stands accused of acting with indifference to a subject people.

In more recent times, except during war, famines have become rarer. China is often compared to India but in this century India has not suffered a famine of comparable dimensions. India's largest famine in modern times took place between 1896 and 1897 when drought led to 5 million deaths. The Bengal famine of 1942, when around 1.5 million died, was caused by the Japanese invasion of Burma which cut off rice imports.

What sets Mao's famine apart from those in Ireland and India is that it was entirely man-made. China was at peace. No blight destroyed the harvest. There were no unusual floods or droughts. The granaries were full and other countries were ready to ship in grain. And the evidence shows that Mao and the Chinese bureaucracy were in full control of the machinery of government.

The event which most resembles Mao's famine is that in the Ukraine in 1932-3 where circumstances were almost identical, as has been shown in [Chapter 3](#). A slightly larger proportion of China's population died in the Great Leap Forward than in the Soviet Union – 4.6 per cent (if one accepts a figure of 30 million out of a total population of 650 million) compared to 4.11 per cent (7 million out of 170 million). In China, deaths were concentrated among the rural population, so out of a maximum 550 million peasants 5.45 per cent died, one in twenty. Around a quarter of the population of the Ukraine perished in the famine there, largely in one year, 1933. However, in parts of China such as Anhui, it is likely that a quarter of the rural population died just as in the Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

One can also compare China with Cambodia under Pol Pot. Inspired by Mao, the Khmer Rouge collectivized the entire population in the 1970s and it is reckoned that out of 8 million people, 1 million died. However, this number also includes the victims of a civil war and a war with Vietnam, so the extent of deaths due to famine alone is unclear.

If we look at Mao's famine as a deliberate act of inhumanity, then his record can also be measured against that of Hitler and Stalin. Some 12 million died in the Nazi concentration camps and a further 30 million were killed during the Second World War. Stalin is thought to have allowed 20 million to die in the gulags and overall he is believed to have been responsible for between 30 and 40 million deaths. However, an investigation into Mao's record by Daniel Southerland in the *Washington Post* suggests that Mao exceeded even these ghastly totals:

*While most scholars are reluctant to estimate a total number of 'unnatural deaths' in China under Mao, evidence shows that he was in some way responsible for at least 40 million deaths and perhaps 80 million or more. This includes deaths he was directly responsible for and deaths resulting from disastrous policies he refused to change. One government document that has been internally circulated and seen by a former Communist Party official now at Princeton University [Chen Yizi] says that 80 million died unnatural deaths – most of them in the famine following the Great Leap Forward.<sup>10</sup>*

## *How to Record the Annals of a Place?*

‘Must we force ourselves to forget the anguish and the wounds of the past so that we can look to the future and move forward? And by forgetting these wounds let them fester in our souls?’ Ba Jin, 1979

In China’s collective memory, the famine is the dog that didn’t bark. Though it was the greatest trauma experienced by the Chinese people since 1949 and no one remained untouched by it, even now it is barely discussed or referred to. No books, no films, no plays are allowed to do more than make a passing reference to the ‘three years of natural disasters’ or the ‘three years of hardship’. And the communes in which the Chinese lived for a quarter of a century have been forgotten.

By contrast, all talk of the Cultural Revolution which followed the famine is positively encouraged and the events of these ‘ten years of chaos’ are often portrayed as a sudden deviation from normality. The Cultural Revolution appears in films as an urban phenomenon, a political upheaval in which high-ranking Party officials were attacked and which brought anarchy to the streets of the cities. It is remarkable therefore that the event which dominated the lives of the vast majority of Chinese, the peasants, does not receive the same attention.

This neglect often appears to be a matter of mere chance. Take, for example, the minor classic *A Cadre School Life: Six Chapters* by Yang Jiang, which appeared in the early 1980s. She and her husband, the prominent writer Qian Zhongshu, were sent from the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing to the countryside in 1970. The book, modelled on the classical Chinese work *Six Chapters in a Floating Life*, tells of the hardships that these middle-aged scholars endured working among the peasants in Henan province.<sup>1</sup>

The poverty of the peasants is described well enough. They steal everything from the hopelessly incompetent literati, from old cabbage leaves to their faeces. Yet at no point does Yang Jiang hint at what she must surely have known – that they were living in Xinyang, an epicentre of the famine, alongside the peasants of Luoshan and Xixian who, ten years earlier, had eaten the corpses of their neighbours and, perhaps, even those of their own children. Though it is possible that the couple heard nothing of this during their stay, the former Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang and the dissident Chen Yi, both of whom were sent to May 7th cadre schools in Henan during the Cultural Revolution, became well aware of what had happened and why the peasants were still so hungry and impoverished. After all, it was surely no accident that so many were punished by being sent to this part of Henan to ‘learn from the peasants’ – in other words to copy their obedience and docility.

Another leading intellectual, the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, who was also sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, did find out what had happened in Anhui and was horrified. Dubbed ‘China’s Sakharov’ for his outspoken criticism of the Communist Party and his advocacy of democracy, Fang Lizhi was a senior figure in Anhui’s Science and Technology University in Hefei who started nationwide student demonstrations in 1987. These led to the dismissal of the General Secretary, Hu Yaobang, and were the precursor of the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. While Fang and his wife sought refuge in the American Embassy after the Tiananmen massacre, he wrote in the *New York Review of Books*:

*Much of the history of Chinese Communism is unknown to the world or has been forgotten. If, inside China, the whole of society has been coerced into forgetfulness by the authorities, in the West the act of forgetting can be observed in the work of a number of influential writers who have consciously ignored history and have willingly complied with the ‘standardised public opinion’ of the Communists’ censorial system. The work of the late Edgar Snow provides one of the most telling examples of this tendency. Snow lived many years in China: we must assume that he understood its society. And yet in his reports on China after the Communists took power, he strictly observed the regime’s propaganda requirements – including the forgetting of history. In Red China Today, he had this to say about China in the early 1960s: ‘I diligently searched without success, for starving people or beggars to photograph. Nor did anyone else succeed... I must assert that I saw no starving people in China, nothing that looked like old-time famine and I do not believe that there is famine in China at this writing.’ The facts, which even the Chinese Communists do not dare deny publicly, are that the early 1960s saw one of the greatest famines in more than 2,000 years of recorded Chinese history. In the three years between 1960 and 1963 approximately 25 million people in China died of hunger. As for beggars, not only did they exist, they even had a kind of ‘culture’ with Communist characteristics. In 1973 in Anhui I listened to a report by the ‘advanced’ Party secretary of a Chinese village. One of his main ‘advanced’ experiences was to organise his villagers into a beggar’s brigade to go begging through the neighbouring countryside.<sup>2</sup>*

Fang’s attack on Western observers such as Snow is discussed later, but from what he has written it is clear that Fang is only one of many Chinese intellectuals whose disgust with their rulers was strengthened by what they discovered about the famine. Another is the dissident Ni Yuxian. In *A Chinese Odyssey*, Ni recounts how, as a young soldier from Shanghai, he discovered what was happening from fellow soldiers, who had received letters from home:

*One evening, Ni Yixian noticed Xiao Liu, one of his new army friends, crying over a letter he had just received...*

*‘My whole family has starved to death,’ his friend replied simply. Xiao Liu was from Anhui... Soon Yixian began to notice other of his fellow soldiers weeping when they received letters from home. He began questioning his comrades. Their stories were always the same. The families of the soldiers were starving. Many were from Anhui...*

In 1962, Ni Yuxian, then aged 16, took two weeks to write a letter of thirty pages to Mao in which he described the terrible famine, the underlying reasons and his remedy – private farming. He showed the letter to three friends and one night in the barracks they lay under a blanket and discussed it. Only one, Yang Guoli, was in favour of sending the letter to Mao: ‘I know it’s dangerous,’ his friend argued, ‘but we have to be responsible to the peasants. If you don’t take responsibility, who will? If Chairman Mao really does read the letter, if he knows the true situation, then the results just have to be good. The policies will change...’<sup>3</sup>

The letter marked the start of Ni Yuxian’s life as a dissident. The same is true of other major figures in the dissident movement such as Wei Jingsheng, the outspoken figure imprisoned during the 1979 Democracy Wall movement, who became one of China’s most famous political prisoners. In his writings, he describes his horror at the poverty he witnessed as a Red Guard travelling through the countryside:

*Eventually I went to my rural ancestral village in Anhui province. During my stay in the village, the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward*



*was deeply impressed on my mind. Whenever the peasants talked of the Great Leap days, it was as though they were reliving ‘doomsday’ and could hardly hide their feelings of having been lucky enough to survive. Gradually, I came to understand that the so-called ‘three years of natural disasters’ were not really natural in origin, but caused by erroneous policies. Peasants recalled, for example, that during the Communising Wind in 1959-60, rice was left to rot in the fields because the peasants were too weakened [by hunger] to harvest.*

*During a gathering at a friend’s house in the neighbouring village, I heard horror stories of villagers who had exchanged babies to eat. I pitied them all. Who had made these parents live to taste, inconceivably, of human flesh mixed with parental tears? By this time, I was able to discern clearly the face of the executioner, whose like would only come along ‘once in several centuries in the whole world and once in several millennia in China’ – and his name was Mao Zedong. It was Mao Zedong’s criminal systems and policies that had made these parents, driven out of their reason by starvation, commit such acts to survive.<sup>4</sup>*

Like others, Wei Jingsheng learned about the famine because, under Mao’s instructions, peasants were urged to ‘speak bitterness’ in village meetings, in other words to remind their listeners of how hard life had been before 1949. Local Party committees were also ordered to compile written histories based on these memories. Many Red Guards were amused by this, as one recalled: ‘When in the Cultural Revolution we attended meetings in villages, the peasants were asked to speak of their hardships under the old regime but they always talked of 1960. The cadres always became furious because they did not speak of the years before 1949.’<sup>5</sup>

For some Red Guards this was the first they had heard of the famine and such tales helped puncture their illusions about Mao. Even the better informed students were shocked to hear just how bad the famine had been. The peasants had fewer illusions. Fatalistic, ignorant of what had happened outside their own village and resigned to bad government, they were careful to keep their thoughts to themselves. Yet their faith in Mao was not necessarily shaken by the famine. One former Red Guard who lived in a poor village in Anhui said that ‘The villagers didn’t blame Mao. They said: “Buddha’s doctrine is right but the monks read the scriptures with a wicked mouth.”’<sup>6</sup> For much of the Mao era, village loudspeakers blared out propaganda about endless successes in the rest of the countryside, and the official propaganda line swung erratically from one extreme to another, indifferent to logic or consistency. At the start of the Great Leap Forward, the *People’s Daily* declared that ‘Today, in the era of Mao Zedong, Heaven is here on earth.’ Two years later the same paper instructed readers to behave ‘as if the times of abundance were the times of shortage’.

Having told the Chinese that the Communist system had ‘conquered nature’ and that ‘natural calamities’ were now a thing of the past, the Party then blamed the famine on natural calamities. People were told that the country had suffered the worst natural disaster ‘for a hundred years’; that unlike any other natural disaster in history, this disaster of droughts, floods, hurricanes, plagues and pests had affected every corner of China; and that this had happened for three consecutive years.

It is doubtful whether anyone in the villages or in the cities really believed this nonsense but fear ensured that no one dared point out such contradictions and fallacies. One interviewee, who was a student in Beijing at the time, recalled that ‘If you said anything, you might be called a counterrevolutionary and put in prison. There were lots of rumours about the failure of the communes but it was impossible to call the people’s communes into question. I made myself not question anything. I thought it was better not to think at all.’

In 1960, the official line changed again. The thousands of Soviet experts scattered around the country suddenly packed their bags. Within two weeks they had all gone and now the shortages were blamed on the Russians. In Beijing University, students were informed that ‘The official reason for the shortages was that China had borrowed a lot from the Soviet Union. Now because of the ideological difference we had to pay back these debts.’<sup>7</sup> In Shenyang, Liaoning province, schoolchildren were told the same thing:

*One day in the bleakest midwinter, a school assembly was held. Principal Gao, thinner and less effervescent than he had been, stood up and denounced the Soviet Union. ‘Our one time “elder brother” has betrayed us,’ he told us. ‘Khrushchev the Revisionist has summoned home all the Soviet engineers and technicians who were in our country helping with socialist construction. He has torn up all the agreements calling for scientific and technical co-operation. He has called in all the loans that the Soviet Union had made to China.’<sup>8</sup>*

Others were told that China had only borrowed these funds to fight the Korean War. The loans allegedly had to be repaid with food. Stories were circulated about how fussy the Soviets were, accepting only apples of a certain diameter. What really happened was quite the reverse. From 1958, China exported millions of tonnes of grain to the Soviet Union to demonstrate to the sceptical Khrushchev the success of Mao’s Great Leap into Communism; and, convinced by her own propaganda, she also stepped up her exports of food and textiles to Hong Kong and many other countries and increased her aid to various allies such as Albania.

The Party also appealed to national pride. Children were told that ‘Chairman Mao has said we must pay back our debts. China must not be a debtor nation. This is a matter of national pride. We must scrimp and save, until the loans are repaid. That is why we have no fruit, vegetables, or grain. They are being sold to raise money. The recklessness of the Soviet Union is responsible for our food shortage.’<sup>9</sup>

More or less the same stories were circulated in labour camps and in the villages. Party officials who debriefed doctors returning from Gansu’s famine regions made false patriotism the cornerstone of their appeal. A Party leader told the medical team that

*The purpose of our meeting today is to improve and unify our thoughts. At present the imperialist and revisionist Soviet Union is taking advantage of our difficulties and forcing us to repay our debts. They are pressing us, the people, to oppose the Party and our Great Leader. They are saying that there are people starving to death. Haven’t you got dignity? Do we help those imperialists and admit people died of hunger? Do we have our national pride? Do we want to disgrace our Party and Great Leader?<sup>10</sup>*

In 1962, the Party also launched a great wave of propaganda to make an ordinary soldier, Lei Feng, who died when a telegraph pole fell on him, the model for the entire nation. His dearest wish was to be ‘a rustless cog in the great machinery of socialism’ and his most heroic attribute was a mindless, unquestioning obedience.

Five years later, the propaganda machine performed its most astonishing somersault. With the Cultural Revolution in full swing, Liu Shaoqi was blamed for the famine:

*A statement published in 1971 exonerated Mao from all responsibility for the Great Leap Forward. Liu Shaoqi was attacked for promoting excessive radicalism to sabotage Mao’s policies in 1958 by urging the hasty nationalization of the communes and the abolition of wages based on the individual’s work performance... in other words the excesses of the Great Leap Forward and the initial defects of the communes were laid at Liu’s door while Mao was depicted as the moderate.<sup>11</sup>*

The official attitude to the truth changed greatly after 1979, when Deng Xiaoping set about overturning collective agriculture. For a brief period,

sometimes called the Democracy Wall movement after a place in Beijing where free speech and wall posters were tolerated, people dared to break many taboos. They attacked the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution and, though direct criticism of Mao was still forbidden, writers were encouraged to expose the madness of the Great Leap Forward. In Henan, Y Xu, the author of the opera *Catastrophe of Lies* mentioned earlier, was given access to internal Party documents. The work was performed and received praise from Deng's lieutenant, Hu Yaobang. Such openness, when the boundaries of what was permissible were undefined, ended in 1981 when the Party drew up its verdict on Mao's rule. The Democracy Wall was closed, *Catastrophe of Lies* was no longer performed, dissenting voices were silenced by harsh jail sentences and all discussion of the Great Leap Forward ceased. In the Party's official resolution on history, Mao was judged to have been 70 per cent correct. The Great Leap Forward was not considered part of the 30 per cent which constituted his mistakes. Instead, the Party declared that 'It was mainly due to the errors of the "Great Leap Forward" and of the struggle against "right opportunism" together with a succession of natural calamities and the perfidious scrapping of contracts by the Soviet government that our economy encountered serious difficulties between 1959 and 1961, which caused serious losses to our country and people.'<sup>12</sup>

Despite the slogan 'Seek truth from facts', the Party issued clear instructions to all concerned on how to handle the past in such internal publications as *How to Record the Annals of a Place*.<sup>13</sup> This particular Orwellian manual, edited by Zheng Zhengxi and published in December 1989, forms part of a series of handbooks for cadres to use when writing the history of their county or work unit. Its instructions apply equally to those supervising histories, plays, novels and films since they must all reflect Party policy. The book is particularly interesting because it recommends a shift in the rewriting of history: 'Some histories still use the old term "three years of natural disasters" as an explanation of the cause of the disaster but we should now make it clear that it was caused by human error. We should not leave people with the impression that judgment has been suspended.'

Indeed, most officials have now stopped pretending that the food shortages were caused by a continual series of disasters. In interviews with the author, senior officials dismissed the notion with a chuckle as if to say, who could be so gullible as to believe such a tall story? In keeping with this change, data on droughts and floods compiled and published by the national meteorological office now show that there was no abnormal weather between 1958 and 1962. Compared to most other years during Mao's rule, there were fewer natural disasters during the famine. In 1960, less than a third of the country's 120 meteorological stations recorded a drought. Of these only eight places posted a severe drought. These official figures were also corroborated by all those interviewed.

In *How to Record the Annals of a Place*, historians are told to treat the Great Leap Forward as an economic, not a political error. This means that the very phrase 'Great Leap Forward' must be written between inverted commas in order to make it clear that there was no increase in production. Those who have done otherwise (the author cites the compilers of histories in Nanjing and Wuxi) are urged to change their texts to delete the earlier view that the Leap brought economic benefits: 'We must start with the fundamental assumption that the "Great Leap Forward" was a bad thing... We should record what happened in the perspective of the whole situation, to show that people blindly launched new projects. Although some were successful, it must be clear that in its entirety it was a failure.'

Such successes as there were must be shown to be the consequence of people rejecting, not following, the methods of the Leap. The author urges other historians to demolish the myth that production rose steeply and, above all, he says historians must differentiate between 'blind fervour' and 'revolutionary spirit'. They should reveal the connection between the anti-right opportunist movement, leftist mistakes and the disasters of the Leap.

The book is particularly interesting when it speaks of the differences between the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. While the Great Leap Forward is a forgivable mistake 'in the Chinese people's pursuit of the road of socialist construction led by the Communist Party', the Cultural Revolution must be treated as 'a severe and disastrous event wrongly launched by leaders and manipulated by a counterrevolutionary group'. It points out, too, that the Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years but the Great Leap Forward only lasted for three, so in terms of damage inflicted the Cultural Revolution was by far the greater catastrophe: 'The "Great Leap Forward" damaged economic life but the Cultural Revolution began in the ideological field so everything was affected.'

Given this emphasis the book talks of the famine chiefly in terms of damage to the Party, so that it is 'only an error in the process of socialist construction of our economy which was solved by readjustment'. In the Cultural Revolution, but not the famine, Party member was set against Party member in an internal war. So the book goes on to spell out how the Great Leap Forward must be recorded so as to put the Party in a good light. The author puts forward an example from his own compilation of the history of Guizhou: 'Even before the Spring Festival there was a food shortage and only enough stored food to last two months. So I recorded what the county Party committee did in a very positive light. I said, for example, that they started an "anti-grain-hiding campaign".' In reality, it was precisely this forcible seizure of grain that caused so many deaths. The moral dimension of what the Party did in creating an artificial famine is entirely avoided by omitting any mention of the price paid in human lives. This absence of any reference to the toll of human misery is in keeping with the general practice in Chinese reporting. While economic losses are always carefully calculated when reporting disasters, similar care is never taken in counting lives lost.

Finally, the book makes it clear that it is still taboo to talk of a famine. This means that official accounts of recent Chinese history still cannot be relied upon. Indeed the degree to which the Party remains in firm control of the past inside China is astonishing, particularly since this also requires the complicity of overseas Chinese, few of whom have been willing to speak out, either from a distorted sense of patriotism, or to protect relatives. Nevertheless, accounts of the period are emerging both within and outside China. One thinly disguised record of the famine was published in China in 1994.<sup>14</sup> *Hungry Mountain Village* tells the story of a Beijing journalist who is labelled as a rightist and then sent to live in a village in the north-west. In this bitter and angry account, no horrors are spared. The local Party officials are portrayed in a particularly harsh light. The village Secretary is an ex-army man who feeds himself and the rest of his family as others starve to death, and exploits his power to force women to sleep with him. Before the spring sowing, he dips the seeds in poison to prevent children eating them and many die as a result. The peasants, too, behave like savages, chopping the bodies of children into meat which they eat. Although this is hardly flattering to the Party, the book avoids all mention of Mao himself. Even for this author, the Great Leader remains beyond explicit criticism.

These official and semi-official restrictions have not blunted the readiness of peasants to talk privately, without inhibitions, about the past. They are well aware of Mao's role, yet they share a genuine reluctance to condemn him. Conversations with peasants follow a circuitous pattern: Mao cannot be entirely blamed because he was deceived by false reports sent by ambitious officials. As always in China, the Emperor is never wrong, only misled by his ministers who flatter him and who in turn are deceived by dishonest lower-ranking officials. On the other hand, they cannot be blamed either, because they have no choice but to follow orders from above. So in the end no one is responsible.

Indeed, hardly anyone was ever punished for the famine. Lower-ranking officials who were initially arrested were often released on Mao's orders. Those condemned as right opportunists were rarely fully rehabilitated after 1979, apart from key figures such as Peng Dehuai who were already dead. The peasants, who lost all their possessions, were generally not compensated. No monuments commemorate the victims and some Chinese are still not



willing to believe that a famine costing so many lives ever took place.

Yet the famine does have a ghostly existence in the collective consciousness of the Chinese. Events in the period are projected back into the pre-1949 past. Films such as the award-winning *Yellow Earth* about the life of drought-stricken peasants in the loess plateau of Shaanxi contain subtle references. Most tellingly of all, when the pro-democracy demonstrators took over Tiananmen Square in 1989, they chose to show their contempt for the Party and to rally support by going on hunger strike. This form of protest is not common in Chinese politics and many Beijing citizens expressed their sympathy by bringing food to the hunger-strikers. Amongst rural Chinese, this symbolic gesture must have tapped a deep well of feeling. How could anyone willingly allow themselves to starve? The effect on the conscience of leaders such as Zhao Ziyang or Deng Xiaoping, men who were so intimately involved with the famine, can only be imagined.

## *The Western Failure*

‘I think the time will come when historians will properly analyse the issue of collectivization.’ Nikita Khrushchev

A famine on such an enormous scale would never have occurred had it not been kept secret. As the economist Amartya Sen was the first to point out, famines are caused by censorship and are the result of political decisions.<sup>1</sup> If Mao had not gone to great lengths to deny that there was a crisis, then however great the shortage of food, the famine would have been averted. However, since 1949 China had become a closed and tightly controlled state in which the Party wielded an absolute monopoly over information. With the press in China silenced, the role of Western observers became of vital importance. Had they alerted the world to what was happening, then the famine might have been averted or at least shortened.

At the beginning of the famine, there were only a few foreign journalists and diplomats stationed in Beijing. Still fewer journalists had permission to tour the country. The largest group watched China from Hong Kong where they interviewed refugees, read the mainland press and listened to broadcasts. Only these small groups of people had the time and patience to analyse the fragments of information which became available and they thus exerted an unusually strong influence on both public opinion and the reactions of Western governments. Above all they influenced the United States, whose citizens were kept out of China but which was reluctant to trust what its ally, Taiwan, said was happening. The China-watchers’ views also influenced the newly independent countries of the Third World as they sought new allies and fresh ideas on development. Neighbours such as North Vietnam and Cambodia were particularly swayed by the reported successes of Mao’s policies but so too were revolutionaries in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

During the famine, the role of these China-watchers became still more important as the world tried to evaluate the truth behind rumours filtering out. Was there really a famine? Should the West offer help? Would the Communists fall?

In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek became convinced that there was a famine, and intelligence reports of uprisings among the peasants on the mainland encouraged him to believe that the population would welcome his army as liberators. Around 1960, he ordered the Nationalist army to prepare for an invasion to recapture the mainland and his government broadcast promises of support to the insurgents and rewards for any Communist officers who changed sides, offering them high positions in a new government. *The New York Times* reported that in 1962 all Taipei was gripped by feverish expectations of an imminent return.<sup>2</sup>

Chiang repeatedly pressed the American government to back his invasion but was always turned down. The invasion never took place and Chiang missed perhaps his only chance of regaining the mainland. In reaching their decision the Americans were confused by the conflicting reports of relations between Beijing and Moscow. If an invasion went ahead would Khrushchev defend China against an American-backed invasion? Fantastic theories were spun which turned on whether there was a real split between the two Communist giants or whether it was merely a ruse to deceive the West.

The risk of sparking off a global conflict was one factor in Washington’s decision not to aid Taiwan but American domestic politics also played a part. In the early 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy had led a vicious campaign to root out supposed left-wing sympathizers within America. Old China hands came under suspicion and were accused of having ‘lost’ China to the Communists, a loss that became particularly grievous when soon afterwards American troops died fighting the forces of the new Chinese regime in the Korean War. Many China experts in the State Department were purged in an atmosphere of suspicion and anger. Thus, for years to come, those academics and journalists who wrote about China risked embroilment in a war between two bitterly divided camps, and reports of the famine in China appeared in a highly politicized, if not partisan, context. Any invasion of mainland China needed first to have the support of the American public: the more horrible the famine, the more support there would be for tough action. American reporters therefore came under pressure from different sides to show China in a particular light.

As it now appears, the mainstream American press reported the famine accurately. In December 1958 the Scripps-Howard newspapers printed a series of articles entitled ‘Chain Gang Empire’, one of which stated that

*the abolition of the family is an avowed, primary sociological objective of Red China’s new commune system – the first serious effort in history to put a whole nation on what amounts to a prison chain gang... We may suspect that no people has ever been forced to work so hard and for so little as the Chinese people... They have suffered much in these years and have been regimented as has no other people in modern times by the most totalitarian regime of the twentieth century.*

A report in 1959 by the *New York World Telegram and Sun* described how in ‘famished Red China slaves steal pig’s slop’.<sup>3</sup> In the following year *Time* magazine reported that in 1960 ‘hunger stalks mainland China for the third straight year’.<sup>4</sup> In 1961 the *Weekly Post* recorded that ‘China must endure an ordeal of famine and pestilence on a scale which even this unfortunate country has not had to face in this century’. In 1962 *The New York Times* claimed that ‘Communist China is a land of massive malnutrition and hunger. Three successive years of poor harvests have reduced the food available to most Chinese to little above the barest subsistence level.’<sup>5</sup>

At the time, however, such reports were ridiculed by many, not least by the respected BBC journalist Felix Greene, brother of the writer Graham Greene. Though based in New York he visited China in 1960 and in his subsequent book, *A Curtain of Ignorance*, he denigrated these reports in the American press, accusing their authors of exaggeration and misinformation, and of having been duped by warmongers in American Intelligence.

The most outspoken and influential figure to argue that something truly terrible was happening in China was Joseph Alsop, a Washington columnist. Throughout the famine he published articles which have turned out to be accurate. At one point, he gave serious consideration to a report that the famine was so bad that the amount of food available per capita had dropped to 600 calories a day: ‘A hospitalized person on a strict diet of 600 calories a day can normally be expected to lose about 20 pounds a month... in short the population of China is starving. The starvation is methodical and rationed but it is not even very slow starvation.’<sup>6</sup>

Greene dismissed this as ‘a medical absurdity’ but Alsop was correct in blaming Mao and his mad rush into establishing communes for the catastrophe, instead of the alleged natural disasters. Mao, he argued, was trying to follow a pattern of industrialization set by Stalin, but the Russians had got away with it because their standard of living was higher. Even if living standards fell by 50 per cent the Soviets had still had a sufficient safety margin to protect them from complete disaster. But China, he insisted, had no safety margin at all. Alsop repeatedly posed the question of whether mass starvation might lead to an uprising. Such concerns were given very serious consideration by the US State Department which was aware of the deep split between Liu Shaoqi and Mao. In the summer of 1962, Alsop wrote in the academic journal *China Quarterly* that no Western nation in modern times had

experienced the ‘nadir of wretchedness’ seen in China:

*The most reliable data obtainable in Hong Kong this spring, derived from great numbers of refugee interrogations and collected and analysed with extreme care, showed an average food intake for mainland China of 1,300 to 1,600 calories per person a day, according to the individual’s labour category. These figures are squarely based on the best first hand evidence that exists; and they are therefore unchangeable except by those experts who think they know more about the Chinese diet than the people who have recently been eating it.’<sup>7</sup>*

The trouble was that it was all too easy to challenge refugee accounts. As an editorial in *The Times* pointed out: ‘Most of the dispute over how much food the Chinese have been eating in the past three years centres on the evidence of refugees who cross the border into Hong Kong... Many of the experts question this evidence, arguing that the refugee is sometimes biased, rarely accurate, usually interested in painting an adverse picture.’<sup>8</sup> This prejudice reflected an earlier opinion of *The Times* that ‘the sufferings of the ordinary peasant from war, disorder, and famine have been immeasurably less in the last decade than in any other decade in the century’.<sup>9</sup>

Amidst this debate, no Americans were allowed into China to see for themselves, partly because of the obstacles erected by Beijing but above all because of Washington’s own restrictions. The United States did not recognize the Communist Party as the legitimate government of China and McCarthyism’s influence ensured that a very tough line was taken to prevent American citizens from going there. The only American journalist who found a way round these impediments was Edgar Snow. Snow had met Mao and other Communist leaders in Yanan in 1936, just after they had escaped encirclement by the Nationalist armies. His subsequent account of the Communists, *Red Star over China*, was a great scoop and even now still ranks as one of the best sources of information on the early history of the Chinese Communists. In 1960 Snow somehow managed to get into China and for five months was taken around the country. In *The Other Side of the River: Red China Today*, he later wrote an exhaustive account of his visits to communes, factories and schools, his talks with senior leaders and his travels to disparate parts of the country, from Inner Mongolia to Chongqing in Sichuan province. He concluded that the famine did not exist:

*Throughout 1959-62 many Western press editorials and headlines referred to ‘mass starvation’ in China and continued to cite no supporting facts. As far as I know, no report by any non-communist visitor to China provided an authenticated instance of starvation during this period.*

*I assert that I saw no starving people in China, nothing that looked like old-time famine (and only one beggar, among flood refugees in Shenyang) and that the best Western intelligence on China was well aware of this. Isolated instances of starvation due to neglect or failure of the rationing system were possible. Considerable malnutrition undoubtedly existed. Mass starvation? No.*

With no other American visitors to hoodwink, the Chinese made use of other Westerners, especially the British. Sir Cyril Hinshelwood, President of the Royal Society, returned from a visit saying, ‘There is much that is tremendously impressive and admirable in new China... it is quite likely that many of them are now freer in some ways than they have ever been.’ The distinguished poet and art critic Sir Herbert Read visited China in 1959 and praised the communes: ‘It does not matter what the system is called... what counts more than statistics is the happiness and contentment of the peasants.’<sup>10</sup>

Generally, the Chinese preferred to invite people who knew as little about China as possible, such as the war hero Field Marshal Montgomery, who in 1961 was given an audience with Mao and afterwards reported that China’s population had not fallen, rather it had increased.<sup>11</sup> Even those who should have known better were duped. Lord Boyd-Orr, an agricultural expert and former head of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, came back from China in May 1959 full of praise. He concluded that China had indeed increased food production by up to 100 per cent and believed that ‘modern farming methods had increased Chinese yields to levels comparable with those of Britain and had ended the traditional Chinese famine cycle... China has one quarter of the world’s population but seems capable of feeding it well.’<sup>12</sup> The distinguished scientist and sinologist Dr Joseph Needham thought it was nonsense even to think that the peasants might be oppressed, claiming that the collective kitchens were ‘a matter of pride in China today, not of compulsion or regimentation’.<sup>13</sup>

The British were not alone. A Swiss economist, Gilbert Etienne, wrote with great confidence in *Le Monde* in December 1961 that ‘It may be said at the outset – and it is one of the rare points on which we can claim to be categorical – that it is false to speak of “general famine”. The grievous times of the Kuomintang, when millions of human lives were eliminated for want of minimum subsistence, have not reappeared.’

At the height of the famine in 1960, only two writers other than Edgar Snow were allowed to enter China. One was Felix Greene. After his Potemkin-like tour he asserted that ‘death by hunger has ceased in China. Food shortages and severe ones there may have been, but no starvation... The indisputable fact is that the famines that in one area or another constantly ravaged the farmlands of China and the fear of starvation, which for so long haunted the lives of Chinese peasants, are today things of the past.’

The third visitor in 1960 was the part-Chinese writer Han Suyin, who also saw no famine. Although her hosts pointedly ran a film for her about the Soviet famine in the 1920-1 period of War Communism, she missed the hint. Even in Sichuan she found no famine and concluded that ‘despite the errors of the Leap [and] the shortages owing to agricultural disasters, the Leap did achieve its main goal which was accelerated industrial development’.<sup>14</sup>

She was followed by other admirers such as Che Guevara from Cuba and the Swedish writer Jan Myrdal who in 1962 was even allowed to spend time in a Chinese village. None of them came back with anything but praise for China. The most outspoken defender of Mao was the French socialist politician, François Mitterrand, who later became France’s President. He spent three weeks touring China and was granted a two-hour interview with Mao which he reported in *L’Express* on 23 February 1961. Mitterrand was certain that ‘Mao is not a dictator... the mastery which he exercises is conferred on him by a power over his people which is not produced by the demagogic fanaticism backed by a strong police state of Hider in Germany, nor the cynical energy of Mussolini in Italy...’ Unlike such right-wing dictators, Mao was a ‘humanist’ and ‘a new type of man’ in whom, Mitterrand said, doctrinal rigour was allied ‘with a vigilant realism’. As such, Mao had to be speaking the truth when he said that ‘the people of China have never been near famine... I repeat in order to be clearly understood: there is no famine in China.’ In his meeting with Mitterrand, Mao boasted that Western newspapers had been unable to find proof of famine:

*Oh, I know your Western newspapers have printed headlines about what they call the famine in China. Their propaganda needs a large helping of deaths. What they are looking for is proof that we have failed. Above all it is our people’s communes which annoy them. They already see the rebels, the millions of peasants marching against our regime... but I want to make this point – we do not care about this campaign of lies which is nothing more than a new form of imperialist aggression... We are used to this. Honest and serious people will understand us in the end. All we care about is their verdict.*

Among these ‘honest and serious people’ were the Western ‘foreign experts’ actually living in China at the time, such as the New Zealand poet Rewi Alley, the British left-wing journalist Wilfred Burchett and Isobel and David Crook, who in 1959 wrote *Revolution in a Chinese Village – Ten-mile*

*Inn.* Such people at best remained silent but some went further, undermining reports of a famine by publishing books that showered praise on the Great Leap Forward and Maoist farming.

The worst apologist was probably Anna Louise Strong. A journalist and propagandist in the Communist cause in both China and the Soviet Union, she should have known better. She had been in the Soviet Union during collectivization and the subsequent famine. In their 1930s' paean to Stalinism, *The Soviet Union: A New Civilization*, the British socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb quoted her as denying that there was any brutality or even force used to expel the *kulaks*. On the contrary, she said, 'the meetings I personally attended were more seriously judicial, more balanced in their discussion, than any court trial I have attended in America'. In 1962 Strong was in Beijing writing propaganda booklets for the Chinese that eulogized the communes. In *China's Fight for Grain*, published in 1963, she repeated Mao's line that China was suffering from the worst natural disasters in a century. The drought was apparently so serious that in 1960 a child could wade across the Yellow River. In this crisis, she claimed, the communes actually saved China from famine: 'The lives of the people and the lives of the communities were cherished. The nationwide slogan became: "No one shall starve!" "... there was no pulverising of communities, no scattering of starving people to beg and die along the roads. All communities even when hungry stood, fought and were given aid.'

It is impossible to say whether such people really knew what was going on and told deliberate lies, whether they deluded themselves, or whether they had no way of finding out the truth, but not all of the 300-400 foreigners then living in Beijing can be accused of bias. One example was the resident correspondent for the Reuters news agency, Clare McDermott.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese Foreign Ministry insisted that Reuters could only send journalists who did not speak Chinese and had no prior knowledge of the country. McDermott therefore relied heavily on his interpreter who was given careful instructions as to what he could tell the foreigner. One interpreter who confided too much disappeared. Not surprisingly, McDermott, though suspecting that there were acute food shortages, was unable to obtain much evidence or even grasp what the thinly disguised attacks on Mao in the press were alluding to. The significance of Deng Tuo's articles or Wu Han's work on Hai Rui, all too obvious to the Chinese, were also missed by more expert analysts in embassies. One of McDermott's translators, who went back to his home in Wutaishan, Shanxi province, in 1962 and found that his family was reduced to eating tomato leaves, returned to Beijing shaken, but McDermott could not make much of this. Felix Greene was thus able to claim that 'Reuters from their bureau in Peking, reported the food shortages, but never described them in terms of "famine" conditions.'

In stark contrast to the Ukrainian famine when some diplomats and journalists did find out what was happening and reported what they saw and heard, none of the foreigners in Beijing between 1958 and 1962 seem to have had any idea that millions were starving to death. The Chinese authorities were far more successful at keeping foreigners in the dark than had been the Soviet authorities. From 1960 to 1963 they restricted the movements of resident journalists and diplomats to the main cities and halted the circulation of provincial papers outside the country.

In such circumstances, the British press tended to assume that China was telling the truth about the natural disasters. *The Times* earnestly reported the theory of Lu Wo, the Deputy Director of the Central Meteorological Bureau, that China's climate was changing. Lu Wo said that there were so many floods and droughts because China had entered a different cycle of weather. The weather story was largely accepted even though meteorologists in neighbouring countries such as Japan noticed nothing unusual.<sup>16</sup> Other papers gave wide coverage to Chinese claims that the food shortages were caused by deliveries to the Soviet Union. The Hong Kong-based magazine *Far Eastern Economic Review* gave little credence to the horror stories related by refugees who had crossed the border into Hong Kong. After all, in 1958 and 1959 China had stepped up its food exports to the colony. One of the *Review's* contributors, Colin Garratt, commented: 'It is clear that many millions of Chinese are very, very short of food. Unlike some of their neighbours in South Korea, very few of them, if any, seem actually to be starving to death.'<sup>17</sup>

Refugee interviews formed the basis of academic research by Americans such as Richard Walker and Ivan and Miriam London who tried to raise the alarm.<sup>18</sup> Their reports became more credible when in early 1961 the Chinese government reversed itself and began to admit grave food shortages. As a result, offers of aid came pouring in. The Kuomintang in Taiwan said they were ready to give 100,000 tonnes of grain. Japan, too, offered help. All sorts of luminaries, among them the philosopher Bertrand Russell, signed letters demanding that something should be done, and the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan spoke of the crisis in the House of Commons. Left-wing papers such as the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian* urged the United States to send food aid.<sup>19</sup> The Labour politician Michael Foot said that Washington with its overflowing granaries should not allow ideological differences to prevent it from delivering aid and US senators such as Hubert Humphrey took up the cause.<sup>20</sup>

From the start, China ruled out accepting aid from America. In February 1961, the Foreign Minister Chen Yi told Japanese visitors that China would never 'stoop to beg for food from the US'.<sup>21</sup> Later, President Kennedy also rejected the possibility, saying: 'The Chinese Communist regime is extremely hostile to us in their propaganda and so on. There are no indications they want the food, and they have never asked for it.'<sup>22</sup> The debate on food relief continued in 1962. One British MP compared the situation to the Soviet Union in 1926 and argued that if the West had done more to end the famine there, then the Russian Communists would have lost power and the course of history would have been changed. Western politicians had other motives for wanting to help.<sup>23</sup> Unrest and even civil war in China were greatly feared, particularly by the British government, which was alarmed by the flood of refugees arriving in Hong Kong in 1962. Some speculated that the refugees might be a Trojan horse to enable Beijing to overthrow British rule. The Hong Kong police started to send the refugees back to China on trains and even Taiwan began to refuse to accept them.

Whatever people outside China said or did, there was nevertheless little that the West could do. China rebuffed all offers of assistance, even those by neutral international bodies such as the League of Red Cross Societies. The Chinese Red Cross Society sent a cable to Geneva saying that although 'our rural areas have suffered from serious natural calamities in the past two years there has never been famine'. It went on to say that the nation was 'fully capable of overcoming temporary difficulties caused by these calamities'.<sup>24</sup>

China would not stoop to accepting charity from foreigners but she did begin to buy millions of tonnes of grain from Australia, Canada and other countries, and imports peaked in 1964 at 6.4 million tonnes. Beijing also appealed to overseas Chinese to send food parcels and donations to buy chemical fertilizer.<sup>25</sup> The Hong Kong press reported that China had offered to give a banquet to any of her citizens who persuaded their relatives in the colony to make a foreign exchange donation to a mainland bank. Hong Kong Chinese queued for hours to send food parcels and in the first half of 1962 alone sent packages worth £2.5 million.<sup>26</sup>

However, as the food shortages eased and the flood of refugees diminished, the world's interest in what had happened in China faded. China's agricultural crisis became an issue restricted to the narrow circles of the China-watchers and the grain traders.

Even now in the West the famine is still not accepted as a historical event. Sufficient doubt was cast on the allegations of Alsop and others at the time for those who later wrote books on China to feel confident in dismissing the famine in a few lines; and this applied both to those sympathetic to Beijing and those mistrustful of the Communists. In his 1966 biography of Mao, the British academic Stuart Schram devoted little more than a sentence to the famine: 'The winter of 1960-61 was a bitter one in China. An extremely efficient system of rationing spread the hunger equally over the entire population but in order to attenuate the famine it was necessary to make large grain purchases from Canada and Australia.' In 1972, a much more critical



and hostile work by the American journalist Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: Inside China's Cultural Revolution*, took a similar line: 'Through their strong, pervasive control network, however, the Communists were able to equalize the food shortages by maintaining a strict rationing system. Widespread famine, which had so often afflicted China in the past, when the death toll during lean years ran into millions, did not occur.' Those who, like Karnow, tried to comprehend the Cultural Revolution were handicapped by this failure to accept the enormous scale of the famine. In fact it was the key to the puzzle.

Political analysts were not alone in making this mistake. An authority on Chinese agriculture, Dwight H. Perkins, wrote in *Agricultural Development in China 1368-1969* (1969) that the Communists' centralized control over the grain harvest had enabled them to cope with natural disasters:

*The impact of this change was clearly demonstrated in the poor harvests of 1959 through 1961. The 15 to 20 per cent drop in grain production which probably occurred in the entire country would have meant in years past many millions of deaths in the areas most severely affected. Tight control, particularly an effective system of rationing, together with the past development of the railroads meant that few if any starved outright. Instead the nutritional levels of the whole country were maintained, perhaps not with precise equality, but with a close approximation to it. As a result, the regime averted a major disaster.*

A belief in the achievements of Maoist agriculture extended to the doyen of American China-watchers, John K Fairbank, who in *China Perceived* (1974) stated that, 'valued in the Chinese peasant's terms, the revolution has been a magnificent achievement, a victory not only for Mao Zedong, but for several hundreds of millions of Chinese people'. Another even more influential American pundit, the liberal economist J. K. Galbraith, became convinced after a visit to China that the country's agriculture worked well. As he wrote in *A China Passage* (1973), 'There can now be no serious doubt that China is devising a highly effective economic system. Frank Coe and Sol Adler [who travelled with him]... guess that the rate of expansion in Chinese industrial and agricultural output is now between 10 and 11 percent annually. This does not seem to me implausible.'

Ignorant of the millions who had been sacrificed on the altar of Mao's vanity, academics and pundits now held up China as a development model, and Mao's policies began to cast a terrible and destructive shadow on the rest of the Third World. With unconscious irony, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* set the tone in an editorial published at the height of the famine in 1960: 'We believe that what is happening in China is of momentous importance because if the authorities succeed in their social, economic and political ambitions they will offer to the world a new champion of the non-European majority, a new model for human society and a new method of overcoming poverty.'

In *China Comes of Age*, published in 1969, the French writer Jean-Pierre Brulé took this a step further and declared that 'Peking's unique experiment thus presents the hungry masses of Asia and Africa with a compelling example, as they struggle to find some way out of their own underdevelopment...' A few years later, the China-watcher Leo Goodstadt wrote in *Mao Tse Tung-the Search for Plenty* that 'when it came to agriculture, Mao was well ahead of other Asian leaders, and his ideas tally with the sort of thinking found among non-Marxist economists...'

One of those economists was the Deputy Director of the World Food Council and a former senior official at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, Sartaj Aziz. In 1978 he devoted a whole book to praising the communes.<sup>27</sup> His book and his message were promoted by another important influence on development thinking, Barbara Ward, the co-author of works such as *Only One Earth — the Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, a report by seventy international development consultants. In the introduction to Aziz's book she wrote that 'The Chinese have found solutions to virtually all the major problems posed by the first stages of modernization... The Chinese achievement was contrived by ignoring the accepted beliefs of western development experts and the most sober tenets of orthodox Marxism.'

Most extraordinary of all, such books specifically credited Mao with having ended China's famines. Brulé, for instance, says that 'the fact that the regime survived the three black years in which natural conditions damaged harvests to an unprecedented degree proved to the Chinese that heaven had not withdrawn its mandate [from Mao]... there were no more of the horrible famines such as that in 1920-21 when half a million died and ten million were left destitute... Mao had fought the dragons and won.'

Others lavished praise on the great achievements of Maoist science. A team of Americans shown around Dazhai and other propaganda showpieces returned to publish *China: Science Walks on Two Legs — A Report from Science for the People*. This uncritical acceptance of Mao's success passed into university textbooks such as *Economics of Change in Less Developed Countries* by David Coleman and Frederick Nixon (1978) which asserted that

*China's scientific and technological capabilities have been developed so as to improve the living standards of the mass of the population, increase agricultural and industrial production and modernize Chinese society... great stress is placed on national self-reliance in technological progress and the policy of 'walking on two legs' is aimed at avoiding the sectoral, geographical and social class divisions and inequalities characteristic of the majority of LDCs [Less Developed Countries].*

China's alleged egalitarianism was much admired, especially when compared with India. Egalitarianism was a key goal in development thinking in the 1970s and enshrined in several UN resolutions. In practice, this meant that policies which allowed some peasants to get richer than others were discouraged in UN-sponsored development projects. Indirectly, this approach endorsed the political persecution of rich peasants by Mao and earlier by Stalin. An Open University textbook by Gavin Kitching entitled *Development and Underdevelopment in Historical Perspective* declares, for example, that 'A total loss of individual peasant autonomy (in the use of land and labour power) has been the price of a continual rise in living standards and of greater equality both among peasants and between peasants and others.' He goes on to claim that Maoist China was a success because it fed its people and 'cut urban-rural migration to zero and indeed sent tens of millions of people out of urban areas into the countryside'.

It is perhaps unfair to criticize such books in the light of later knowledge, but many of these judgements were based on little evidence. After the Great Leap Forward, China published few statistics and those figures that were made available merely consisted of percentages, none of which could be verified, let alone measured, against independent research. China was an intensely secretive, tightly controlled society, as even her admirers conceded. Too many scholars readily accepted propaganda as fact, and even though more details of the famine emerged in the 1980s, there has still been a deep reluctance to reconsider the question. Gavin Kitching's book came out in 1989, several years after American demographers had announced that 30 million had died during the famine, and school textbooks such as *Modern China* by C. K. Macdonald also continued to promote the idea that the famine had nothing to do with the Great Leap Forward: 'Between 1960-1962 famine hit China. This was due mainly to the bad weather. In some parts of China there were floods, in other parts drought... It is difficult to judge how many people died in the famine. But one thing is certain; the big improvements made in farming in the 1950s saved millions more Chinese people [from] starving to death.'<sup>28</sup> Another children's book, by Gladys Hickman, *Introducing the New China* published in 1983, ignored the famine altogether and lauded the communes even as they were being disbanded: 'China has managed to do something almost no other developing country in the world has done: give everyone a better chance of a "good life". The communes are the key to this success. It is through the communes that rural life in China is being transformed.'<sup>29</sup>

Writers with a far deeper knowledge of China have also hesitated to face up to the famine. In 1990 Oxford University Press published a history of China, *Rebellions and Revolutions* by Jack Gray, which still avers that the famine was not man-made.

*It has been suggested in China that twenty million people died as a result of the agricultural disasters of these three bad years. If that is so, it was one of the greatest recorded famines in history. The figure is the result of indirect inferences drawn from the movement of China's population figures and cannot be taken literally. But there is no doubt that the number of deaths from famine and the results of malnutrition were at least of the order associated with the great famines of the past.*

Gray even argues that Mao was the first leader to recognize the existence of the famine and to issue orders to rectify the crisis.

Another textbook published two years later, *Chinese Communism* by Dick Wilson and Matthew Grenier, further minimizes what happened: 'The bad harvest of 1959 following so closely after the fragmentation and disorganisation of the peasant economy, resulted in three years of the worst famine since the Communists came to power.' And a recent biography of Mao by the Australian scholar Ross Terrill which was reissued in 1993 devotes only a few lines to the famine and stresses the positive side of the Great Leap Forward: 'As therapy the Leap was not without benefit, each generation must find its own excitement, and 1958 provided some for millions of young farmers. Local initiative was sparked, communal spirit grew. The ordinary person felt anew his Chineseness and a new framework of rural government – fusing work life and civic life – came into existence.'

Only one book devoted to the famine has been published in English – *Famine in China, 1959-61* by Penny Kane, a British academic. Though strong on demographics, elsewhere the author appears to sympathize with Mao. She argues that Peng Dehuai was wrong to challenge Mao in 1959 because this turned the crisis into a leadership battle and she goes on to support China's decision to reject outside help and to praise the rationing system: 'Even in 1959-61, it seemed probable that coordinated group activity and the sharing of any available resources helped to protect the most vulnerable from suffering disproportionately.' She is also inclined to see the benefits of Mao's policies: 'Among the positive outcomes of the period of the Great Leap, now often overlooked, was that it was highly educational. Large numbers of agricultural scientists and technicians spent time in the rural areas instead of in laboratories and many experiments aimed at improving existing agricultural practices were attempted.'

Given these entrenched perceptions in the world of academia, it is not surprising that Third World students working abroad became enthusiastic about Mao's China. Many studied in China itself or visited it, including those men who would later play a leading role in Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia. In Somalia, Tanzania, Guinea and Ethiopia, revolutionary leaders tried to copy the agricultural ideas of Mao and Stalin. Traditional agricultural practices were abandoned, large-scale irrigation schemes were launched, the small peasant farmer was made a social outcast and various types of collectives and communes were attempted. As in China, the goal was the mechanization of agriculture but the tractors rarely materialized. Instead many of these governments found themselves grappling with a hostile peasantry, famine and civil war.

China's close ally, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, for example, explicitly talked of creating a 'Great Leap Forward' when he resettled between four and six million of his subjects in collective villages and spoke of the need to prevent the growth of a '*kulak* class'. In Ethiopia, the revolutionaries who took power after overthrowing Emperor Haile Selassie were divided, some supporting Mao, others Stalin. Their debate over rural policy became so fierce that the different factions waged pitched battles in Addis Ababa during a period known as the 'Red Terror'. The Maoists lost but Colonel Mengistu later moved the peasants into semi-voluntary co-operatives and then launched a three-year forced collectivization programme. As the programme was stepped up, Mengistu attacked the rampant 'individualism' of rich peasants, and the private plots allowed to peasants were reduced from a fifth to a tenth of a hectare.

It was not just in sub-Saharan Africa that Mao's communes were admired and imitated. Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria and Libya all tried various forms of collective agriculture. Some writers have argued that in Iran the Shah lost the support of the peasantry when he began forcing them out of their villages into 'agro-business units'. However, Chinese influence was most evident in North Vietnam and Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot was taken to Dazhai and when he won power he set out to imitate China's perceived success. Determined to restore Khmer pride, he tried to outdo Mao in his zeal to establish collective agriculture. The entire population was sent to the countryside and forced to labour night and day on massive irrigation schemes which the Party promised would create huge wealth. The canals and dams were built without expertise or learning, which the Khmer Rouge held in contempt, and, as in China, they soon collapsed. Haing Ngor, the Cambodian doctor who won an Oscar for playing Dith Pran in the film *The Killing Fields*, writes in his autobiography:

*Except for their dark skins, everything about the Khmer Rouge was alien, from China. They had borrowed their ideology from Mao... like the concept of the Great Leap Forward. Sending the intellectuals to the countryside to learn from the peasants was an idea of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Their AK-47s and their olive green caps and their trucks were Chinese. Even the music they played from the loudspeakers was Chinese, with Khmer words.*

As Haing Ngor points out, it was ignorance of what had really happened in China which gave Pol Pot the overweening confidence to think he could take a war-torn, bankrupt agricultural country and turn it into an industrial power. He believed that Mao had exploited the latent energies of the people by freeing them from cooking meals or raising children and channelling them into backbreaking manual labour.

*Unfortunately Pol Pot the maker of policy was the same Saloth Sar the mediocre student. He did not realise that Mao's Cultural Revolution was already a disaster and that Stalin's attempts had set the Soviet economy back by decades. He did not examine the idea to see if it was practical. It was senseless to build huge canal systems and dams without using engineers, but then Pol Pot was like that. He tried to make reality fit politics instead of the other way round.<sup>30</sup>*

Pol Pot's guilt for the terrible disaster which overtook Cambodia, where one in eight may have died in the space of four years, is beyond doubt. Yet some responsibility must also be apportioned to those in the West who shared his belief that politics could change reality.



# Afterword

This book has tried to establish what happened during a famine but it also describes what happens when a country and its leader descend into total madness. China was gripped by what Carl Jung once termed a ‘psychic epidemic’, when all rational behaviour is abandoned. The absolute power which Mao achieved engendered a collective escape into a world of utter delusion. All that mattered to the millions in the Party was to pander to the fantasies of its leader. Many knew they were telling lies and that the truth was that the country was starving. Even Mao, at the apex of these lies, was not deluded. As his doctor Li Zhisui recounts, ‘Mao knew the peasants were dying by the million. He did not care.’ What Mao wanted from his followers, argues Dr Li, was proof of absolute and undivided loyalty: ‘Mao was the centre around which everyone else revolved. His will reigned supreme. Loyalty, rather than principle, was the paramount virtue.’

In *Grass Soup*, one of the fellow prisoners of Zhang Xianliang is a Muslim, Ma Weixiao, who suggests that Mao intentionally used the famine to enforce the absolute and unquestioning servitude that he craved: ‘Even the illiterate have to eat. Only by making the people endure hunger can you make them submit to you, to worship you. So you see, don’t let Chinese people have full stomachs – keep them hungry and in a few years not just people, even dogs, will be reformed. Every one of them will be as obedient as can be: whatever Chairman Mao says will be right. Not one will dare refuse to prostrate himself before Chairman Mao.’

Yet Mao had won power by espousing a philosophy based on rationalism and modern Western thought. In place of the millennia of feudal emperor-worship, he promised democratic and scientific Marxism-Leninism. He was genuinely convinced that scientific farming and collectivization could transform both Chinese agriculture, the basis of the country’s economy, and the lives of the vast majority of Chinese. After all, in the Soviet Union Lenin and Stalin had used the same methods and had created a superpower which had defeated Nazi Germany, built the nuclear bomb and, in the 1950s, launched the first satellite into space. It was strong and disciplined, modern and scientific: China could be the same. Even if Mao and his colleagues knew the terrible cost in human lives which Lenin and Stalin had paid, they might have considered this a sacrifice worth making. Yet Mao not only deluded himself about the supposed success of collectivization in the Soviet Union, he also refused to accept the evidence that these ideas were creating a catastrophe in China.

Listening to accounts from all over the country about the failure of the Great Leap Forward, it sometimes seemed to me as if the extreme violence it unleashed may have derived from this fundamental lack of comprehension of and frustration with an alien way of thought. Much in the same way that a child might vent his rage and smash a toy because he cannot get it to work, Mao could not accept that his peasants would not behave as he thought they ought to if the country was to jettison its legacy of feudal habits and beliefs. Mao wanted to modernize China but could not grasp the basis of modern thought, the scientific method: that the way in which the natural universe behaves can be proved or disproved by objective tests, independent of ideology or individual will. So instead of becoming ‘new men’, Mao and his followers lapsed into a pattern of behaviour established 2,000 years earlier by the first Emperor Qinshihuangdi, perhaps the greatest tyrant in Chinese history.

Yet if one accepts this as an explanation for Mao’s behaviour, it still does not explain why so many others were willing to torture large numbers to death to deliver grain which they did not and could not have possessed. This deliberate and senseless cruelty has few parallels in history. These peasants were, after all, not the conquered slaves of some alien power but supposedly the beneficiaries of the revolution.

Perhaps the answer lies in the early history of the Chinese Communist Party. At least some of its members, such as Kang Sheng, had endorsed the use of unqualified violence against the peasants right from the beginning. Not only was no mercy shown to landlords, but rich and middle peasants, a much larger group, were treated with equal brutality. Those labelled as the enemy were beyond redemption. By the beginning of the Great Leap Forward officials are recorded in Party documents as saying that the peasants must be regarded as the enemy since they stand in the way of progress. This readiness to strip villagers of all their rights was allied to a general contempt for the peasants which may date back still further, to Confucius. He had described them as ‘inferior beings’ who, since they cannot be educated, must be exploited.

But during the Great Leap Forward local officials, often peasants themselves, saw their own kith and kin starve to death before their very eyes. Why did the peasants not rise up in mass revolt?

When the dissident Wei Jingsheng spent time in the countryside of Anhui and heard stories of the famine, he began to ponder this question, concluding that it was just because of class warfare that Mao retained his power: ‘Mao used class struggle to divide people into imaginary interest groups, rendering them incapable of discerning their true interests. Thus, he was able to incite people to engage in mutual killing or goals that were, in fact, detrimental to their own interests. It was precisely through this technique that he fooled and oppressed millions and manipulated them into supporting him. It was precisely for this reason that he was able to conceal his real face and masquerade as the people’s leader.’

Many interviewees also claimed that the peasants had developed such a deep trust in the Party that they were reluctant to act. In the opera *Huang Huo* by Du Xi, one of the characters, Zhang Sun, the Party Secretary of a production brigade, says: ‘Even though the grain has been taken away, let us wait and see. The Communist Party will not let people starve to death... If the sky falls it will strike us all. Is it only our village which is starving? Let us wait a while and we will see more clearly. After all, the Communist Party would never let the masses starve to death.’

At first, the peasants also did not believe that they would starve because after all the grain was there, it existed. With cunning they might get it back from the state. In the opera the central character, Li Baisuo, resorts to one such subterfuge.

He offers to ‘launch a sputnik’ and, by promising to close-plant 330 lbs of seeds per *mu*, ten times the normal amount, hopes to get enough seed grain to feed the village through the winter. When an inspection team arrives, he organizes the villagers into staging a charade of sowing the grain which succeeds in convincing the inspectors. The stratagem only fails because the brigade chief, Zhang Sun, is too honest and loyal to the Party. He feels compelled to reveal the truth and so Li is arrested and struggled as a ‘right opportunist’ and then beaten and paraded around the villages wearing a cloth bearing the character ‘right’.

Many interviewees also blamed the honesty of the peasants – in the Henan countryside people took pride in saying ‘It is better to starve to death than beg or steal.’ At the climax of Du Xi’s opera, when all is lost, the villagers debate whether they should attack the state granary but some protest: ‘Even though we are starving to death, we cannot take that road!... Without the government’s permission, we cannot touch a single grain from the state granary.’

Many also retained a belief that Mao would save them. In some places I was told that peasants dragged themselves to the top of the nearest mountain, faced the direction of Beijing and called out aloud for Mao to help them. At the end of *Huang Huo*, the hero, Li, decides on a desperate course of action. He will go to Beijing and petition Chairman Mao. He declares that Mao will support him and prevent cruel local officials from oppressing the peasantry, and adds: ‘This is not the same as [the] 1942 [famine]. For generation after generation, the years were poor, the harvests thin. This time there is only a temporary shortage of food.’ After this speech, the brigade chief Zhang drags him off to be punished at the Party headquarters but Zhang’s wife

shows her anger at this by committing suicide. Zhang repents, confesses he has let the Party down, and allows Li to escape and, in the final scene, board a train to Beijing.

On the other hand, starving peasants had risen in revolt before in Chinese history: indeed much of China's dynastic history appears to have been propelled by such uprisings, not least that led by Mao himself. Yet never before had China been governed by such a ruthless and efficient police state. There was simply nowhere to go to escape the grip of Mao's control.

In the opera, the villagers consider fleeing to beg for food elsewhere but abandon the plan because they realize they would soon be caught by the militia and sent back. Throughout China, millions of others reached the same conclusion. Unable to leave their villages, they had little chance of organizing themselves in sufficient numbers to challenge the army or even the militia unless they too were starving. And in many cases, by the time the peasants had realized that the state would not save them, they were usually already half dead with hunger and too weak to take any effective action.

Many Chinese have blamed the tragedy of the famine not so much on Mao as on Chinese culture, claiming that both subjects and ruler were powerless to break patterns of behaviour enforced over 5,000 years. China is the world's oldest continuous civilization and the Chinese still use the same hieroglyphic characters as their distant ancestors and speak recognizably the same language. In the late 1950s, it was as if the slaves of the Pharaohs had somehow stumbled into the twentieth century. The peasants' way of life, their huts and tools, were little different from those of their forebears in the Shang dynasty. In the famine their moral code was still ordered by the injunction of the first Han Emperor who 2,200 years earlier had authorized them to eat their children if there was no other choice. Perhaps, too, they felt as powerless before the arbitrary will of the Emperor as had their ancestors. As the Shang dynasty inscription puts it: 'Why are there disasters? It is because the Emperor wants to punish mankind.'

Blaming the past for the Great Leap Forward may partly explain the psychology of both Mao and the peasants but it seems to ignore the singularity of what occurred. Mao could not be brought down because he had created a world in which all beliefs and judgements were suspended. No one dared move or act according to what he knew to be true. Instead, even the highest-ranking officials moved in a secretive society paralysed by an all-pervasive network of informers and spies. In a world of distorting mirrors, it became hard to grasp that such senseless cruelty could really be taking place. The grotesque efforts that some officials made to deceive leaders such as Liu Shaoqi almost defies imagination. Who could believe that Party officials would plaster and paint trees stripped of their bark by starving peasants to hide a famine from the country's President?

The bizarre nature of so much of what happened inspires a feeling of deep shame which still makes many Chinese reluctant to discuss the circumstances of the famine. For the absurdly triumphant claims of miracle harvests and the mass starvation that followed reflect badly not just on the Communist Party but on the entire nation. But what if Liu and others had conspired to overthrow Mao during the famine or afterwards? Mao had threatened to start a civil war and could indeed have led his followers to the hills and there held out as guerrillas. China might then have ended up like Cambodia, only on a far greater scale. Other powers, the Soviet Union, the United States and Taiwan, would soon have been sucked into backing different factions. Perhaps an intractable civil war with tens of millions of refugees might have been still worse than simply waiting and trying to persuade Mao to come to his senses.

All this is only speculation, though, for we are unlikely ever to know what passed through the minds of the leadership during this darkest period. The files may never be opened as they were in Cambodia after the Vietnamese invasion. There will be no museums devoted to the victims of the famine. The dead seem destined to remain hungry ghosts un placated by any memorial or apology, and it is almost too late to charge those responsible with crimes against humanity. In China, Mao's reputation, tarnished though it is, cannot be completely destroyed without calling into question the whole edifice of Communist rule in China. And yet, if the Chinese are kept in ignorance of what happened, that would be another kind of tragedy. If the famine remains a secret, the country will draw no lessons from its past nor learn that only in a secretive society could so many have starved to death.

# Appendix: Biographical Sketches

Chen Boda (1904-89): from a rich landlord's family, Chen was born in Fujian and attended Moscow's Sun Yat-sen University in 1927. One of Mao's personal secretaries and the editor of *Red Flag*, he held extreme left-wing views and was very influential during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He fell from power in 1970 and subsequently spent years in prison.

Chen Yun (1905-95): joined the CCP in 1925. In the 1950s Chen was one of the top seven leaders of the country and designed the first five-year plans. He opposed the Great Leap Forward and helped restore the economy in 1961-2 but afterwards withdrew from power. After 1979 he was one of the main architects of reform and a rival to Deng Xiaoping.

Chiang Kai-Shek (1887-1975): born in Zhejiang province, Chiang took over the leadership of the KMT after 1924. He lost the civil war and in 1949 retreated to Taiwan.

Deng Tuo (1912-66): born in Fujian, Deng joined the CCP in 1930, became editor of a CCP newspaper in 1937 and after 1949 rose to be chief editor of the *People's Daily* and secretary of the Beijing Party committee secretariat. He wrote a history of famine in 1937, and in 1961 strongly attacked Mao. Deng was one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution.

Deng Xiaoping (1904—): born in Guang'an, Sichuan, Deng studied in France and Moscow and joined the CCP in 1924. As General Secretary of the CCP he led the anti-rightist campaign and was a leading light in the Great Leap Forward. At the end of 1960, he withdrew his support for Mao's policies and favoured the dismantling of the communes. After 1978, he instigated the contract responsibility system.

Gao Feng (1914-76): born in Shaanxi, Gao joined the CCP in 1933. After 1949, he became Party Secretary of the Xinjiang autonomous region and then moved to Qinghai where he was also political commissar of the Qinghai military zone. As Party Secretary of Qinghai, he was responsible for 900,000 deaths. After 1961, he was dismissed and sent to Jilin as deputy director of the local Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee.

Hu Yaobang (1915-89): the son of a Hunanese rich peasant, Hu joined the Communists as a 'red devil' or child soldier and later rose to the leadership of the Party's Youth League. He supported Mao during the famine and was rewarded with senior posts in Hunan. Subsequently he became a protégé of Deng Xiaoping. After 1979, Deng made him General Secretary of the CCP. He was responsible for the liberalization of the rural economy but was toppled after student demonstrations in 1987 for being too liberal on ideological issues. His death in 1989 triggered the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement.

Hua Guofeng (1921–): born in Shaanxi, Hua joined the CCP in 1940 and became Party Secretary of Xiangtan prefecture, Hunan, where Mao's home village is located. He solidly backed Mao during the Great Leap Forward by denying that a famine was taking place. He became Party Secretary of Hunan in 1970. In 1976 he succeeded Mao and became Prime Minister but was brought down in 1979. Mao had appointed him as his successor with a note saying 'With you in charge my heart is at ease'.

Kang Sheng (1899-1975): born in Shandong, Kang joined the CCP in 1925 and organized the first major purge in Yanan in 1942. He was a member of the ultra-left faction that promoted the Great Leap Forward and was in charge of Cultural Revolution purges. He died of bladder cancer.

Ke Qingshi (1900-65): born in Anhui, Ke spent time in Russia in 1922. An ultra-leftist, he later became Party Secretary of Shanghai and the East China Bureau. He died a natural death.

Li Jingquan (1909-89): born in Jiangxi, Li joined the Party Youth League in 1927 and became a member of the CCP in 1930 after which he took part in the Long March. As First Secretary of Sichuan and the South-west China Bureau during the Great Leap Forward he was responsible for 7-9 million deaths. He died in honourable retirement in Beijing.

Lin Biao (1907-71): born in Hubei, Lin joined the CCP in 1925. He replaced Peng Dehuai in 1959 as Defence Minister and supported Mao in his hour of need in 1962. He was designated as Mao's successor in 1969 but died in a plane crash supposedly after a failed coup attempt.

Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969): born in Ningxiang, Hunan, Liu joined the CCP in 1921 and studied in Moscow's University of the Toilers of the East. He was second in rank to Mao from 1942 and actively promoted Mao Zedong Thought, but he opposed the rush into collectivization in the 1950s and resisted Mao's efforts to return to Great Leap Forward policies after 1961. He was the chief target of the Cultural Revolution, dubbed the number one capitalist roader and China's Khrushchev. He died in prison in 1969 after violent persecution. He was married to Wang Guangmei.

Mao Zedong (1893—1976): born in Shaoshan village, Xiangtan prefecture, Hunan, Mao was a founding member of the CCP in 1921 and leader of the CCP from 1935 until his death.

Panchen Lama (1938-89): born in Qinghai province he was recognized as the tenth reincarnation of Tibet's second highest religious figure. He stayed in China after the Dalai Lama fled but described the horrors of the Great Leap Forward in a 90,000-word report to Mao. He was kept under house arrest or in prison between 1963 and 1977, and was only formally rehabilitated in 1988.

Peng Dehuai (1900-74): born in Xiangtan, Hunan, Peng joined the CCP in 1928, one of the few leaders to come from a poor peasant family. He was one of China's ten marshals who later led Chinese forces in the Korean War. He criticized the Great Leap Forward at the Lushan summit and Mao dismissed him. Imprisoned in 1966, he spent years in prison suffering torture and physical humiliation.

Wu Han (1909-69): born in Zhejiang, Wu became a teacher at Qinghua University and a member of the China Democratic Alliance. He rose to become Dean of the History Department at Qinghua University and a member of the National Culture and Education Committee. An expert on Ming history he was Deputy Mayor of Beijing during the Great Leap Forward. During the famine he attacked Mao through the play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Persecuted in 1965, he died during the Cultural Revolution. He was rehabilitated in 1979.

Wu Zhifu (1906-67): born in Henan in Qi Xian county, Wu joined the CCP in 1925 and became a pupil of Mao's at the Peasant Movement Training Institute. During the civil war he ran a guerrilla branch of the New Fourth Army and orchestrated a campaign of terror against landlords. During the Great Leap Forward he was Party Secretary of Henan and was responsible for up to 8 million deaths. He died in October 1967 in Guangzhou.

Zeng Xisheng (1904-68): born in Hunan not far from Mao's home county, Zeng attended the Whampoa Military Academy, met Mao in 1923 and joined the Party in 1927. He was Mao's bodyguard during the Long March and then was in charge of military intelligence. He later became the political commissar of the Fourth Route Army. After 1949, he was appointed Party Secretary of northern Anhui before taking charge of the whole province. As Party Secretary of the whole of Anhui during the Great Leap Forward, he was responsible for the deaths of up to 8 million people, as well as a similar number in Shandong. He introduced agricultural reforms in 1961 but Mao dismissed him in 1962. He was tortured and killed during the Cultural Revolution.

Zhang Wentian (1900-76): born in Jiangsu, Zhang joined the CCP in 1925 and studied at Moscow's Sun Yat-sen University. After 1949, he was posted as ambassador to the Soviet Union and then returned to serve as deputy foreign minister. He opposed Mao at the Lushan summit and was demoted to the level of researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences where he studied 'the theory of socialist economic construction'. He survived persecution during the Cultural Revolution and was rehabilitated in 1979.

Zhang Zhongliang (1907-83): born in Shaanxi, Zhang joined the CCP in 1931 and led a peasant uprising in 1933. After 1949, he was initially Party Secretary of Qinghai before moving to Gansu. There he was responsible for over a million deaths during the famine. He was dismissed in 1961 and sent to Jiangsu as chief secretary of the provincial Party secretariat. Though persecuted during the Cultural Revolution he died peacefully in retirement in Nanjing.

Zhao Ziyang (1919-): in charge of agriculture in Guangdong and a keen promoter of the Great Leap Forward under the provincial leader Tao Zhu. Zhao's report triggered off the first round of forced grain seizures. However, he was attacked during the Cultural Revolution for advocating private farming. In the late 1970s, he was brought back and, as Party Secretary in Sichuan, initiated rural reforms and ordered the first dismantling of a commune. Deng made him Premier after 1979 and later General Secretary. He was dismissed in 1989 for supporting democracy protests and is still under house arrest.

Zhou Enlai (1899-1976): born in Jiangsu, Zhou studied in France and then joined the CCP in 1922. Though he opposed collectivization in 1956 he later made a self-criticism and thereafter supported the Great Leap Forward. He did not challenge Mao after 1962 and served him throughout the Cultural Revolution.

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# Notes

## Chapter 1: China: Land of Famine

- 1 Research by the Student Agricultural Society of the University of Nanjing under Professor John Lossing Buck, Professor of Agricultural Economy at the university.
- 2 Deng Tuo, *China's History of Disaster Relief*, p. 286.
- 3 Kay Ray Chong, *Cannibalism in China*, p. 110.
- 4 He Bochuan, *China on the Edge*, p. 6.
- 5 Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time*, p. 202.
- 6 Andrew James Nathan, *History of the China International Famine Relief Commission*, p. 6.
- 7 Annual report of the China International Famine Relief Commission, 1925.
- 8 Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China*, pp. 214—215.
- 9 Annual report of the China International Famine Relief Commission, 1927.
- 10 Quoted in Walter H. Mallory, *China, Land of Famine*, p. 2.
- 11 John Ridley in the *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1946.
- 12 A. K. Norton, *China and the Powers*, pp. 173-174.
- 13 Report by the South Manchurian Railway quoted in *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 12, p. 318.
- 14 Theodore H. White, *In Search of History*, pp. 147-149.
- 15 Theodore H. White, *In Search of History*, pp. 97-98.
- 16 *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1946.

## Chapter 2: Arise, Ye Prisoners of Starvation

- 1 Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, p. 175.
- 2 Quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 August 1960.
- 3 *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, pp. 23-24.
- 4 Much of this section is drawn from Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow* and Alec Nove's *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* The quotations of Soviet writers come from these sources.
- 5 R. H. Tawney, *China: Agriculture and Industry*.
- 6 Herman Graf von Keyserling, *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (trans. J. Holroyd Reece). London: Jonathan Cape, 1927, p. 401.
- 7 Fei Xiaotong, *Peasant Life in China*, p. 181.
- 8 Randolph Barker and Radha Sinha with Beth Rose (eds.), *The Chinese Agricultural Economy*, pp. 37-38.
- 9 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, pp. 80-86.
- 10 This material is taken from 'Historical Change of Land Reform of the CCP' published by the Research Group of Rural Institutes of China in *Rural Institutions and Development*, No. 3, p. 48. See also Luo Fu, *The First Soviet in China*, p. 68; Zhao Xiaomin (comp.) *History of Land Reform in China*, 1921-1949, p. 85; and TonYing-ming (comp.), *Land Revolution Report*, 1927-1937.
- 11 John Byron and Robert Pack, *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng*, p. 193.
- 12 John Byron and Robert Pack, *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng*, p. 196.
- 13 Claire Hollingworth, *Mao and the Men Against Him*, pp. 82-83.

## Chapter 3: The Soviet Famines

- 1 This chapter draws on Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*; Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*; *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*; and the 1988 US Congressional Commission's investigation into the Ukrainian famine, 1932-1933.
- 2 Michael Ellman, A Note on the Number of 1933 Famine Victims', *Soviet Studies*, 1989.

## Chapter 4: The First Collectivization, 1949-1958

- 1 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, pp. 140-142.
- 2 Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower*, p. 41.
- 3 Han Suyin, *Wind in the Tower*, p. 43.
- 4 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 122.
- 5 Interview with officials in Sichuan.
- 6 Mao Zedong, *Selected Works 1954*.
- 7 Interview with Frank Kouvenhoven and Dr. Antionet Schimmelpennick, musicologists at Leiden University.
- 8 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 189.
- 9 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. xxiii.
- 10 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 203.
- 11 John Lossing Buck, *Food and Agriculture in Communist China*, pp. 18-20.
- 12 Li Rui, *A True Account of the Lushan Meeting*, p. 45.
- 13 See Thirty Years in the Countryside—True Records of the Economic and Social Development in the Fengyang Agricultural Region, p. 162.
- 14 Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*, [Chapter 12](#).
- 15 Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China*, pp. 276-277, 286.
- 16 Unpublished biography of Zeng Xisheng, due to be published in 1996.
- 17 *Khrushchev Remembers*, pp. 272, 275.
- 18 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 December 1958.
- 19 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, pp. 281-282.

## Chapter 5: False Science, False Promises

- 1 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, pp. 216-217.
- 2 Quoted in Klaus Mehnert, *Peking and Moscow*, p. 356. Mehnert also describes how during the Great Leap Forward, Shanghai writers undertook to produce 3,000 literary works in two years. Soon they had far exceeded their plan: one single evening three thousand Shanghai workers and soldiers 'produced' 3,000 poems and 360 songs. One the poems awarded a special prize was 'Ode to the Red Sun':  
'When Chairman Mao comes forth, The East shines Red. All living things prosper, The Earth is "red". Six hundred million, peony bright: Each one is "red". For all our beautiful hills and streams, Eternal time is "red".'
- 3 Quoted from a Red Guard magazine in Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, p. 84.
- 4 Dawa Norbu, *Red Star over Tibet*, p. 129.
- 5 Zhou Libo, *Great Changes in a Mountain Village*, was translated by Derek Bryan and published by the Foreign Languages Press in 1961. Quoted in *A Chinese View of China* by John Gittings, p. 139.

- 6 John Byron and Robert Pack, *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng*, p. 234.
- 7 John Byron and Robert Pack, *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng*, p. 234.
- 8 Li Rui, *A True Account of the Lushan Meeting*, p. 8.
- 9 Mikhail Klochko, *Soviet Scientist in China*, pp. 139-140.
- 10 *People's Daily*, 1958.
- 11 *They Are Creating Miracles*, Foreign Languages Press, 1960. The Chinese edition appeared earlier.
- 12 For a detailed account of Lysenko see Zhores A. Medvedev, *The Rise and Fall of T. D. Lysenko*, translated by I. Michael Wermner, Columbia University Press, 1969; and David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair*, University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- 13 Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, p. 13.
- 14 Roderick MacFarquhar, Timothy Cheek and Eugene Wu (eds.), *The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao*, p. 450.
- 15 Denis Fred Simon and Merle Goldman (eds.), Science and Technology in Post-Mao China, p. 48.
- 16 Denis Fred Simon and Merle Goldman (eds.), *Science and Technology in Post-Mao China*, p. 53.
- 17 Interview with the author.
- 18 British United Press, printed in the *Guardian*, 24 March 1960.
- 19 Reported in the *Sunday Times* by Richard Hughes, June 1960.
- 20 Alfred L. Chan, 'The Campaign for Agricultural Development in the Great Leap Forward: A Study of Policy-making and Implementation in Liaoning', *China Quarterly*, No. 129 (March 1992), pp. 68-69.
- 21 Bo Yibo, *Retrospective of Several Big Decisions and Incidents*, Central Party School, 1993.
- 22 Interview with Chen Yizi.
- 23 *China Pictorial*, 1959.
- 24 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 1959.
- 25 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 December 1958.
- 26 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*.
- 27 Reuters, 7 April 1960.
- 28 Interview with the author.
- 29 Vaclav Smil, *The Bad Earth: Environmental Degradation in China*.
- 30 *Human Rights Watch Asia Report*, February 1995, pp. 37-44.
- 31 Dai Qing (ed.), *Changjiang Yimin (Population Transfer on the Yangzi River)*, a documentary anthology.
- 32 Richard Hughes, *The Chinese Communes*, p. 69.
- 33 Interview with the author.
- 34 Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, p. 226.
- 35 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, p. 121.
- 36 Interview with author.
- 37 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, p. 139.
- 38 Jack Potter and Sulamith Heins Potter, *China's Peasants—The Anthropology of a Revolution*, p. 73.
- 39 William Hinton, *Shenfan*, p. 218.
- 40 Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *Cambridge History of China*, vol. 14, pp. 378-386.
- 41 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 August 1960.

### Chapter 6: Mao Ignores the Famine

- 1 From *Red Flag*, quoted in Richard Hughes, *The Chinese Communes*, p. 48.
- 2 I have not been able to discover who first proposed the name. Some claim it was Wu Zhifu's idea but it is more likely that it was the brainchild of Chen Boda and was a reference to the Paris Commune. Later, when Mao was trying to minimize his responsibility for the Great Leap Forward, he claimed he was misquoted by a local journalist.
- 3 Stanley Karnow in *Mao and China* writes that at a Central Committee meeting held in Wuchang at the end of 1958, it was decided to halt the Great Leap Forward and reverse some of its measures (pp. 111-112). At the same meeting Mao resigned as President and this was taken to mean that he had suffered a political setback. As with much of what happened (and still happens) inside the highest levels of the Communist Party, the full story is confusing and murky. However, it is important to remember that Mao rarely paid attention to what the Party organization planned or did, nor did his followers who regarded his utterances as imperial decrees.
- 4 Bo Yibo, *Retrospective of Several Big Decisions and Incidents*, Central Party School, 1993, p. 714.
- 5 David Shambaugh, *The Making of a Premier: Zhao Ziyang's Provincial Career*, Westview replica edition, 1984, p. 21.
- 6 Jurgen Domes, *Peng Dehuai: The Man and His Image*.
- 7 Sources based on Party documents.
- 8 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 195-196.
- 9 Jurgen Domes, *Peng Dehuai: The Man and His Image*, has a different translation (p. 93): 'Grain scattered on the ground, / Potato leaves withered, / Strong young people have left to make steel, / Only my children and old women reap the crops. / How can they pass the coming year? / Allow me to raise my voice for the people!'
- 10 Jurgen Domes, *Peng Dehuai: The Man and his Image*, p. 113.
- 11 Li Rui, *A True Account of the Lushan Meeting*, p. 104.
- 12 The quotes from these exchanges appear in various books, notably Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China*, and Li Rui, *A True Account of the Lushan Meeting*.
- 13 Han Suyin, *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China, 1898-1976*, pp. 268-275.
- 14 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, p. 296.
- 15 In 1961 another opera was written, intended as a bitter and unmistakable allegory, in which Hai Rui is Peng Dehuai scolding the foolish Emperor. This was criticized by a future member of the Gang of Four, Yao Wenyuan, a protégé of the Shanghai Party boss Ke Qingshi. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution began with a further attack on the opera.
- 16 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, p. 152.
- 17 David M. Bachman, 'Chen Yun and the Chinese Political System', China Research Monograph, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 71-74.
- 18 Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 293-294.
- 19 *Far Eastern Review*, 26 September 1959.
- 20 Ding Shu, *Ren Huo*.
- 21 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, p. 339.
- 22 Ding Shu, *Ren Huo*.

### Chapter 7: An Overview of the Famine

- 1 Judith Banister in *China's Changing Population* (pp. 312-318) notes that there were also rebellions among the Yi, Dong and Miao minorities in south-west China and that a sizeable group of Dai people from Yunnan fled to Burma, Laos and Thailand. In 1962, 70,000 fled Xinjiang for the Soviet Union and another 60,000 the following year.
- 2 Unpublished Chinese sources.
- 3 Interviewees said that a member of each household had to report each week on the activities of neighbours. In addition, there was a curfew and a blackout during the famine. No buildings above one storey could be built and many other precautions were taken.

- 4 Pu Ning, *Red in Tooth and Claw*, pp. 184—185. Resolution of 10 December 1958.
- 5
- 6 Interviews with the author.
- 7 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 170.
- 8 *China Youth Journal*, 27 September 1958.
- 9 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 170.
- 10 Liu Binyan, *A Higher Kind of Loyalty*, p. 98.
- 11 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 170.
- 12 Bo Yibo, *Restrospective of Several Big Decisions and Incidents*, p. 754.
- 13 Quoted from Mark Elvin, ‘The Technology of Farming in Late Traditional China’, in Rudolph Barker and Radha Sinha with Beth Rose (eds.), *The Chinese Agricultural Economy*, p. 14. Elvin cites ‘Par les missionnaires de Pékin’, *Mémoires concernant les Chinois* (Paris and Lyon, 1776-1814), 14 vols.

**Chapter 8: Henan: A Catastrophe of Lies**

- 1 Some sources claim this took place in May when twenty-seven co-operatives were merged.
- 2 Instructions given by the Central Party Committee following the Xinyang Prefectural Party Committee Report on ‘The Movement of Work Style Rectification, Commune Reconstruction and the Organization of Production and Disaster Relief, unpublished.
- 3 Figures from confidential sources.
- 4 Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 360.
- 5 Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 359.
- 6 Su Xiaokang, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 359.
- 7 Confidential sources based on internal Party documents.
- 8 The detailed descriptions of tortures which follow come from confidential sources but are discussed in less detail in books published in China.
- 9 Unpublished Party document.
- 10 Instructions given by the Central Party Committee following the Xinyang Prefectural Party Committee Report on ‘The Movement of Work Style Rectification, Commune Reconstruction and the Organization of Production and Disaster Relief, unpublished.
- 11 Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 360.
- 12 These figures appear in Su Luozheng’s *July Storm*, Su Xiaokang’s *Utopia* and Ding Shu’s *Ren Huo*.
- 13 Confidential documents.
- 14 ‘Bai Hua Speaks His Mind in Hong Kong’, *Dongzhang*, No. 45/46, December 1987 and January 1988.
- 15 Interviews with the author.
- 16 Interviews with the author.
- 17 Confidential sources.
- 18 Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions*, p. 290.
- 19 Frederick Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China*, p. 276.
- 20 See also Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 358.
- 21 Interviews with the author.
- 22 Interviews with the author.
- 23 Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan Conference*, p. 358.
- 24 Su Luozheng in *July Storm* claims that Wu also attacked the ‘conditions only theory’, the ‘pessimism theory’ and the ‘mythology theory’ (p. 359).
- 25 Su Luozheng, *July Storm—The Inside Story of the Lushan, Conference*, p. 359.
- 26 Su Luozheng in *July Storm* claims that people had starved to death even in November 1958. By the spring of 1959 many in eastern Henan were suffering from oedema and the number of deaths was increasing (p. 358).
- 27 Unpublished Party documents.
- 28 Unpublished Party documents.
- 29 *Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 1963.
- 30 Interviews with the author.

**Chapter 9: Anhui: Let’s Talk about Fengyang**

- 31 A flower drum, or *huagzi*, was used by travelling beggars to call for alms.
- 32 Wang Lixin, *Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record*, p. 269.
- 33 Interview with retired Anhui official.
- 34 Wang Lixin in *Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record* includes the story of how a team of oxen ploughed 36 *mu* in one evening (p. 270). He also points out that at the end of the Great Leap Forward 38 per cent of the arable land had been ruined and 36 per cent of the draught animals had died.
- 35 Wang Lixin in *Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record* claims that 97 per cent of the population ate at the county’s 2,641 canteens and that often they served only half a pound of grain per person per day (p. 270).
- 36 *Thirty Years in the Countryside* contains this passage (p. 194): ‘Some villages had to hand in their mouth food [daily consumption grain] and seed grains... some brigades had no grains to cook but county Party Secretary Zhao still ordered the digging up of possible grain stocks. Zhao convened a big meeting of all county cadres to get more grain by struggle. In the struggles some cadres were physically beaten. After the meeting, similar struggle meetings took place all over the county. Special grain-hiding investigation teams were set up in many brigades, and teams were sent to search every household. The masses were strung up and beaten. People’s mouth grains and grains grown on the private plots were taken away. Even the leaves of sweet potatoes, eggs, etc. were confiscated in the name of “anti-bourgeois” struggle.
- 37 The interviewee insisted that her name and that of her village remain confidential.
- 38 These figures and quotations are taken from *Thirty Years in the Countryside* (p. 195), but also surface in a number of books published in mainland China, including *The Later Years and Months of Mao*, and Wang Lixin, *Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record*.
- 39 Wang Lixin, *Agricultural Reforms in Anhui—A True Record*, p. 275. I was unable to discover the fate of Zhang Shaobao.
- 40 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 196.
- 41 A book of photographs published by the Party to commemorate the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China contains a picture of a hastily scribbled note by Zhou Enlai. The accompanying caption reads: ‘The errors of the “Great Leap Forward” and “Anti-Right Opportunist movement” caused serious difficulties to China’s national economy and vital damage to the state and people. Early in 1960, there was a famine and disaster in He and Wuwei counties. Also, it was a fact that people starved to death, so immediately Zhou Enlai wrote to Zeng requesting him to investigate the situation and report back:
- Comrade Xisheng,
- I am writing this letter to request you to send people to Shancun [words indistinct] to conduct an investigation, after you read this letter, to find out if there is such a matter. Perhaps this has been exaggerated. This sort of individual case happened in every province especially in those provinces where there were disasters last year. It is worthwhile paying attention to what Chairman Mao said in the document of the 6th-level cadres meeting in Shandong province. He stressed that we should take this seriously. Please when you make everything clear, send a reply.
- Best regards, Zhou Enlai 29 March 1960’
- 42 Wang Lixin, *Agricultural Reforms in Anhui—A True Record; Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 275; and interviews with the author.
- 43 One source claimed that 100,000 left Wuwei.

- 44 Interviews with the author in Anhui, 1994.
- 45 Interview with a former senior Party official, Chen Yizi.
- 46 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 275.
- 47 In Wudian 14,285 people died out of a population of 53,759. In the Guangming production brigade, 832 out of a population of 1,638 died and in the Banjing production brigade 1,627 out of a population of 4,100 died.

## Chapter 10: The Other Provinces

- 1 Interview with the author.
- 2 Interview with the author.
- 3 Zhou Yueli, Zeng Xisheng's former secretary.
- 4 Peng Xizhe, 'Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1987, pp. 645, 663.
- 5 Peng Xizhe, 'Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1987, p. 663.
- 6 Stuart and Roma Gelder, *The Timely Rain—Travels in New Tibet*, pp. 106-111.
- 7 Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population*. On p. 304, Banister writes: 'During the period 1953-57 interprovincial movement appears to have been relatively great. Recipients of net in-migration during those years were Beijing and Tianjin municipalities and the northern provinces of Nei Mongol, Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, judging from their high annual growth rates.' She also points out that 'Figures on provincial populations at the beginning and end of this period may mask enormous temporary migrations in the interim' and that 'many other provinces recorded a population gain from 1957 to 1964, but the annual rate of growth was so low that there must have been enormous loss of life plus a net out-migration. Shandong was severely affected, as were Guizhou and Hunan.'
- 8 Peng Xizhe, 'Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1987, pp. 662-663.
- 9 Interview with the author.
- 10 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 241.
- 11 Interview with the author.
- 12 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 241.
- 13 Interview with the author.
- 14 Interview with the author.
- 15 Interview with the author.
- 16 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 241.
- 17 Ding Shu, *Ren Huo*.
- 18 Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, p. 243.
- 19 Interview with the author.
- 20 Letter to the author.
- 21 *Great War Literary Magazine*, published in Henan province.
- 22 Zhao died in Taiyuan in his home province of Shanxi in September 1970. He was noted for his many books about the local peasants and for his accounts of land reform. He had joined the Party in 1937, becoming editor of the Eighth Route Army newspaper, and was highly regarded within the Party.
- 23 After 1949, the provincial capital, Lanzhou, was transformed into a major industrial centre. During the Great Leap Forward, huge numbers of peasants were dispatched to construct the massive Tao River scheme. Rain is irregular in Gansu so the Soviet-inspired planners designed a reservoir, a dam and hydro-electric plant, and a giant canal 120 feet wide as well as a network of irrigation canals.
- 24 Frederick Teiwes, *Politics and Purges*, pp. 273-289.
- 25 *October*, No. 5, 1988.
- 26 Peng Xizhe, 'Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces', *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1987, pp. 650-661.
- 27 Interviews with the author.
- 28 Interviews with the author.
- 29 Quoted in Ding Shu, *Ren Huo*.
- 30 Yi Shu, 'One Thousand Li Hunger', *Kaifang*, August 1994.
- 31 The dissident and democracy activist Wei Jingsheng has recalled that during his travels as a Red Guard he took a train along the Gansu Corridor around 1967. He was shocked to see starving and naked women and children begging for food in every railway station. His companion in the train, a cadre, told him that such sights were very common in these parts and said that they were former landlords and rich peasants, or just lazy, and that it did them good to be hungry. Wei refused to believe this and when he gave some of the beggars his food, they fought over it. A full account of what Wei saw is not available in a collection of writings by and about him which his sister made public in Germany in 1995.
- 32 Ding Shu, *Ren Huo*.
- 33 Interviews with the author.
- 34 Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*, pp. 230-231.
- 35 Judith Banister in *China's Changing Population* (pp. 303-305) provides the following statistics: Sichuan's population fell by 0.91 per cent from a population of 72.16 million at the end of 1957 to 69.01 million in mid-1964.
- 36 One former production leader told me: 'We were like slaves then. A man's life was worth nothing. People crawled around on their hands and knees dying of hunger.'

## Chapter 11: The Panchen Lama's Letter

- 1 Interview with local official.
- 2 Interview with local official.
- 3 Another group of eastern Tibetans is also found in Yunnan province.
- 4 Identified as Xiao Cheng in western Sichuan.
- 5 Interview with former inmate.
- 6 Rewi Alley and Wilfred Burchett, *China: The Quality of Life*, p. 43.
- 7 Interview with former official. Another source claims the population fell by one-third.
- 8 Interview with former official.
- 9 Cited by former officials based on the Panchen Lama's findings.
- 10 Interview with survivor.
- 11 See also John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*.
- 12 Information provided by the International Campaign for Tibet.
- 13 Jamphel Gyatso, *The Great Master Panchen*. The book was published in 1989 but was later withdrawn from circulation.
- 14 Jamphel Gyatso, *The Great Master Panchen*. A copy of the Chinese text of the Panchen Lama's report is in circulation outside China and confirms the magnitude of his anger at the severity of the crisis.
- 15 Jamphel Gyatso, *The Great Master Panchen*.
- 16 Dawa Norbu, *Red Star over Tibet*, p. 210.
- 17 Dawa Norbu, *Red Star over Tibet*, p. 208.
- 18 John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 237.
- 19 The size of the garrison in the TAR also increased because of China's border war with India.
- 20 John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*.



- 21 *Tibet under Chinese Communist Rule. A Compilation of Refugee Statements, 1958-1975*, published by the Information Office of the Dalai Lama, p. 56. The nuns, from Michungri monastery in the suburbs of Lhasa, arrived in Sikkim on 2 March 1961.
- 22 Tsering Dojje Gashi, *New Tibet: The Memoirs of a Graduate of the Peking Institute of National Minorities*, p. 105.
- 23 Dawa Norbu, *Red Star over Tibet*, p. 208.
- 24 Interviews with the author.
- 25 It is not certain whether the Nationalist Commission includes the TAR population in its figures and, in the absence of census figures, has used an estimate. Inner Tibet was counted separately until 1965 when the TAR was formally inaugurated. It is frequently said that it had 1 million residents, or 40 per cent of all Tibetans within China’s borders. If the Nationalities Commission figures do exclude the TAJR population, then altogether there would have been about 4 million Tibetans before the famine, the figure claimed by a number of Tibetan sources. This would imply a still higher death toll.
- 26 Press conference given by TAR officials at the National People’s Congress in April 1955.

Chapter 12: In the Prison Camps

- 1 Some were arrested for warning of the dangers of Mao’s agricultural policies. In Guangzhou, Zhang Naiqi was labelled as a rightist for writing letters drawing attention to the growing hunger among the peasants. One interviewee recalled that this was also why her father was sent to prison: ‘In 1956 my father heard our maid tell him about the hardship of the peasants. She came from Shunyi, a county outside Beijing. They earned so little grain per work point—20 fen a day—that there was nothing to eat. This maid said everyone in her village was dying from hunger so my father decided to go and see for himself. I remember he brought back the food they were eating—cakes of mixed leaves, weeds and cornmeal. At the Ministry of Culture he told a meeting that the peasants shouldn’t be suffering like this. People applauded him and shook his hand and said he showed the right concern for the peasants. Then, a few months later, he was accused of spreading anti-government stories and sent to a labour camp in the far North.’
- 2 A further 10 million were imprisoned for other crimes, bringing the overall total to at least 50 million. Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, p. 17.
- 3 Interview, *South China Morning Post*, 5 May 1993, after he left China.
- 4 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*, p. 183.
- 5 Interview, *South China Morning Post*, 5 May 1993.
- 6 John R Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 263.
- 7 In Qinghai, Han Weitian recalled that often his fellows were alive at night but would be dead by dawn. He, too, saw corpses piled up and said that every day more than 30 corpses were taken away by cart from each production team.
- 8 Interview with the author in Hong Kong.
- 9 John R Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 262.
- 10 Dr Benjamin Lee has written an unpublished account of his experiences and his medical observations.
- 11 David Patt, *A Strange Liberation: Tibetan Lives in Chinese Hands*, pp. 184—185.
- 12 John R Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 252.
- 13 Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, p. 109.
- 14 Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, p. 112.
- 15 Zhang Xianliang, *Grass Soup*, p. 205.
- 16 John R Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 262.
- 17 David Patt, *A Strange Liberation: Tibetan Lives in Chinese Hands*, p. 82.
- 18 Interview with the author.

Chapter 13: The Anatomy of Hunger

- 1 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- 2 *Thirty Years in the Countryside*.
- 3 Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*, pp. 17-18.
- 4 Interviews with the author.
- 5 Emmanuel John Hevi, *An African Student in China*, p. 41.
- 6 Dr Lee’s paper has not been published at the time of writing. It was rejected by a number of academic journals whose editors were unwilling to believe what he reported. For example, Dr. William J. Visek of the *Journal of Nutrition*, published by the American Institute of Nutrition, replied, saying ‘there is a lack of verification and quantitative information that can be tested and which satisfies the policy of the *Journal* to provide new information about the science of nutrition in any species. On page 4 your manuscript states that two men would carry 200 kg of muddy earth on their shoulders with a shoulder pole up a slippery slope 100 times per day. This is equal to 440 lbs per trip. That seems unreasonable under any set of conditions.’ However Dr. Lee’s account is borne out by many other eyewitnesses and is undoubtedly accurate.
- 7 I interviewed Dr Choedak in 1995 but have taken this from the account of his time in prison reported in John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 252.
- 8 Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, p. 102.
- 9 In fact, Wu Ningkun met Dr Lee in the camps and recalls his first conversation: ‘Lucky dog. We had to be brought to this wilderness because Qinghe was packed to bursting. Well, you’d better get back to your labour now. Come seem me at the clinic in the evening before the roll call, Professor. My name is Benjamin Lee, but just Lee here, for a Christian name will land you in more trouble.’
- 10 Zhang Xianliang, *Grass Soup*, p. 82.
- 11 David Patt, *Strange Liberation: Tibetan Lives in Chinese Hands*, p. 184.
- 12 John F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows*, p. 253.
- 13 Interview with the author.
- 14 Interview with the author.
- 15 Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*, p. 17.
- 16 Steven Mosher, *A Mother’s Ordeal*, p. 37.
- 17 Interviews with the author.
- 18 Interview with the author.

Chapter 14: Cannibalism

- 1 Literally, it means ‘swop child, make food’.
- 2 Steven Mosher, *A Mother’s Ordeal*, p. 39.
- 3 The details and quotations in this chapter are taken from Kay Ray Chong, *Cannibalism in China*, unless otherwise stated.
- 4 There references are taken from the report of the US Congress Commission on the Ukrainian Famine held in Washington and issued in 1988.
- 5 This was an internal communication but it appears that while the authorities allowed millions to starve to death, they also publicly tried to dissuade people from resorting to cannibalism. Harry Lang, a Western traveller in the Ukraine at the time, noted: ‘In the office of a Soviet functionary I saw a poster on the wall which struck my attention. It showed the picture of a mother in distress, with a swollen child at her feet, and over the picture was the inscription: “Eating of Dead Children is Barbarism”. The Soviet official explained to me: “We distributed such posters in hundreds of villages, especially in the Ukraine. We had to.”’ See Robert Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*.
- 6 The report of the US Congress Commission on the Ukrainian Famine held in Washington and issued in 1988. This extract is from 19 July 1933.
- 7 Reported by Nicholas D. Kristof in *The New York Times*, January 1993.

Chapter 15: Life in the Cities

- 1 Interviews with the author.
- 2 Interviews with the author.

- 3 Peng Xizhe, ‘Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China’s Provinces’, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, December 1987, p. 655.
- 4 Steven Mosher, *A Mother’s Ordeal*, p. 32.
- 5 Tsering Dorje Gashi, *Memoirs of a Graduate of the Peking Institute of National Minorities*, p. 71.
- 6 Wang Lixin, The Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record, p. 271.
- 7 Interview with the author.
- 8 Interview with the author.
- 9 Interview with the author.
- 10 Interview with the author.
- 11 Interviews with the author.
- 12 Interviews with the author.
- 13 Nien Cheng is the author of Life and Death in Shanghai, the story of her arrest and detention during the Cultural Revolution. This incident, however, comes from an interview.
- 14 Tsering Doije Gashi, Memoirs of a Graduate of the Peking Institute of National Minorities, p. 76.
- 15 Steven Mosher, A Mother’s Ordeal, p. 37.
- 16 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 November 1960 and 4 December 1962.
- 17 Interview with the author. Yuan Mu became a senior official and achieved considerable notoriety as the government’s spokesman during the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989.

## Chapter 16: Liu Shaoqi Saves the Peasants

- 1 Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography*, p. 292.
- 2 Liang Heng, *Son of the Revolution*, p. 18.
- 3 Ding Shu, Ren Huo.
- 4 Interview with the author.
- 5 Ding Shu, Ren Huo.
- 6 One former senior official told me that Mao was pleased with what he heard and then sent Hu to investigate the famine in Anhui and report on the reforms taking place there. Hu returned with a report which accused Zeng of abandoning Communism. Mao liked this and circulated it, rewarding Hu by promoting him to a senior position in charge of the Party organization in southern Hunan. A biography of Hu claims that Hu’s attitudes changed in 1961, after he was sent to supervise agricultural policy changes in Tang county, Hebei province. Furthermore, the Hong Kong magazine *Ming Bao* later carried a story with a more positive view of his activities in Anhui: ‘Twice inspection teams arrived in Anhui to look at the disaster but both times they were turned away. The investigators were confined to local guesthouses and not allowed to meet lower cadres or the masses. Deng and Liu both believed that without firsthand information it would be impossible to deal with Zeng Xisheng so they sent Hu Yaobang at the head of the third team.’
- 7 Wang Lixin, *Agricultural Reforms of Anhui—A True Record*, p. 279.
- 8 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, pp. 377-378.
- 9 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, p. 378.
- 10 Interview.
- 11 Denis Fred Simon and Merle Goldman (eds.), Science and Technology in Post Mao China; Lawrence Schneider, Learning from Russia: Lysenkoism and the Fate of Genetics in China, 1950-1968; and Merle Goldman, China’s Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent.
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- 2 *China: Agriculture to the Year 2000*, p. 18.
- 3 Vaclav Smil, The Bad Earth: Environmental Degradation in China, p. 44.
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- 5 Liu Binyan, A Higher Kind of Loyalty, p. 99.
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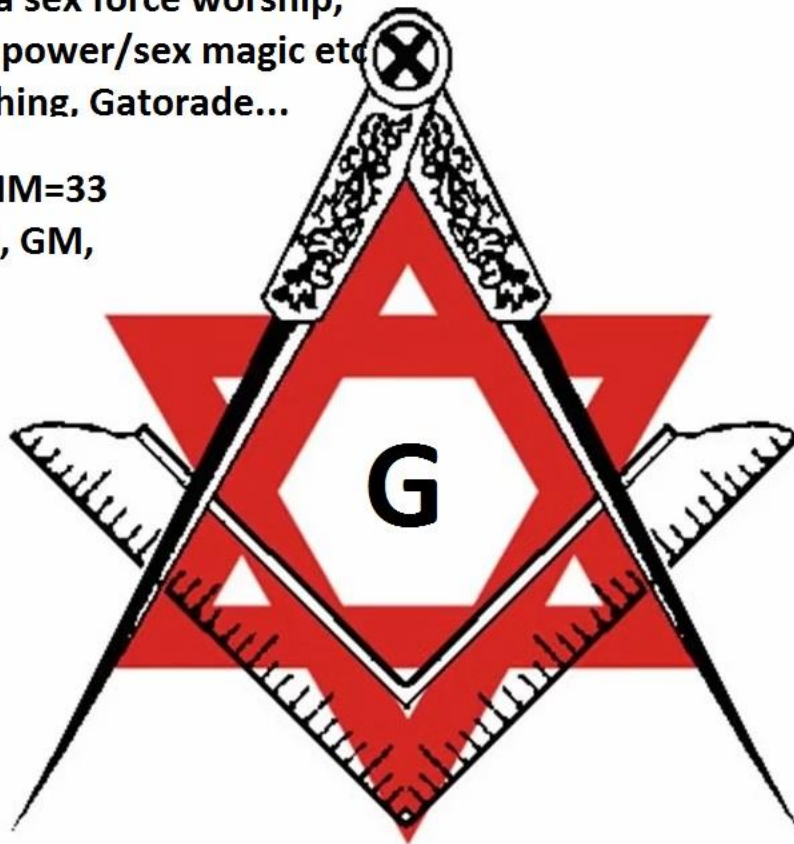
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**G=7, generation aka sex force worship,  
Kunalinga, serpent power/sex magic etc  
"nuthin but a "G" thing. Gatorade...**

**M=13, Mirrored, MM=33  
on its side, M&M's, GM,  
etc**



## The Permanent Instruction of the **Alta Vendita**

**T**his little booklet examines *The Permanent Instruction of the Alta Vendita*—the once secret papers of the Masons which outline a plan to subvert the Catholic Church. The author quotes the actual Masonic document, which both Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) and Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) asked to be published. This document describes the Masons' diabolical strategy to destroy the Church by infecting her leaders with Liberal ideas. In this way, Catholics would be promulgating Masonic ideals under the mantle of seemingly legitimate Catholicism. The book describes how far the plot has succeeded, and it includes an appendix detailing the aims of Freemasonry, as well as Leo XIII's denunciation of that society. It also contains the famous *Oath Against Modernism* required by Pope St. Pius X of all clergy, plus an official prayer for the conversion of Freemasons. This dynamic little booklet gives the reader an awareness of the dangers posed by Freemasonry and will expose the truth about the secret aims of this powerful secret organization.

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## The Permanent Instruction of the **Alta Vendita**

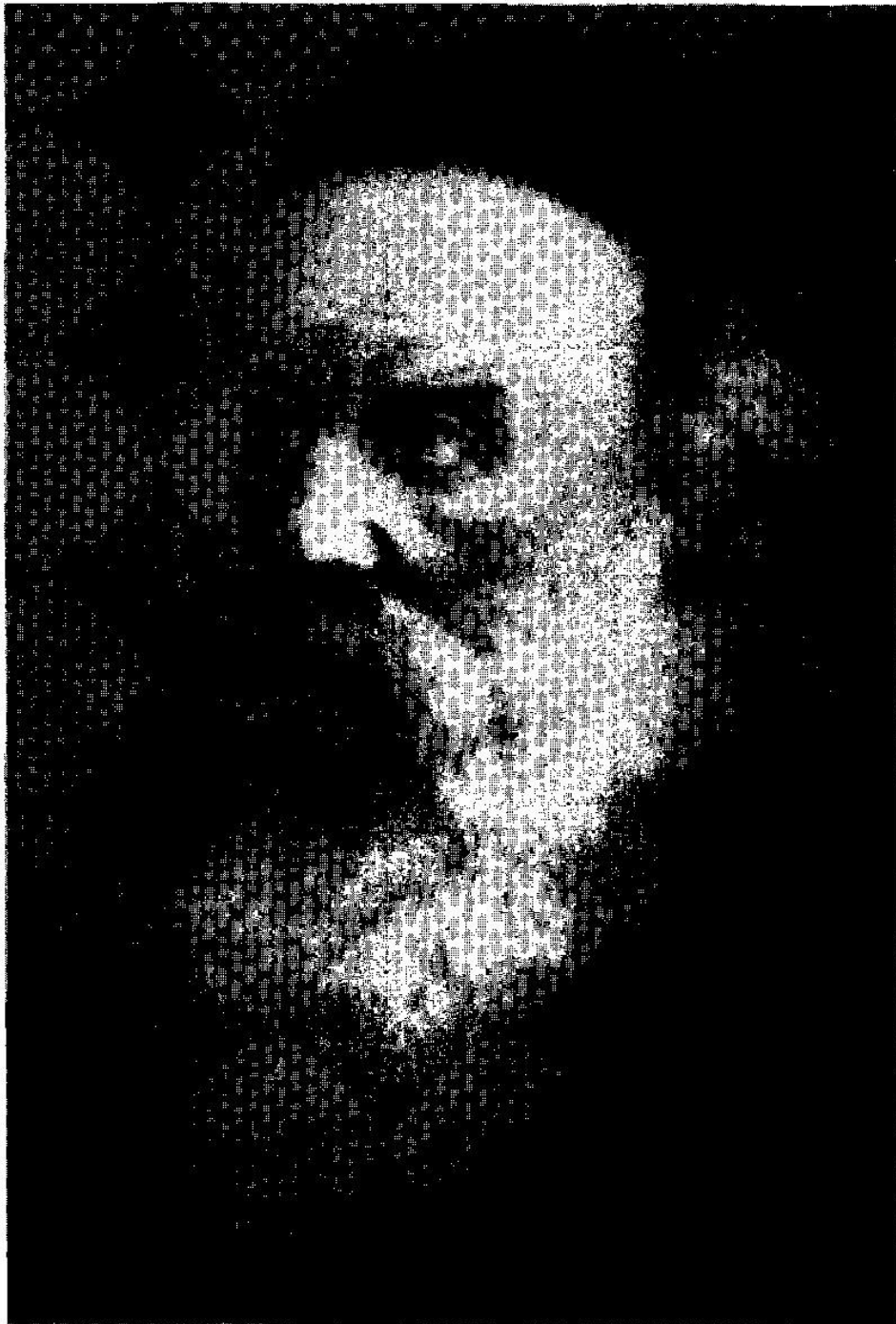
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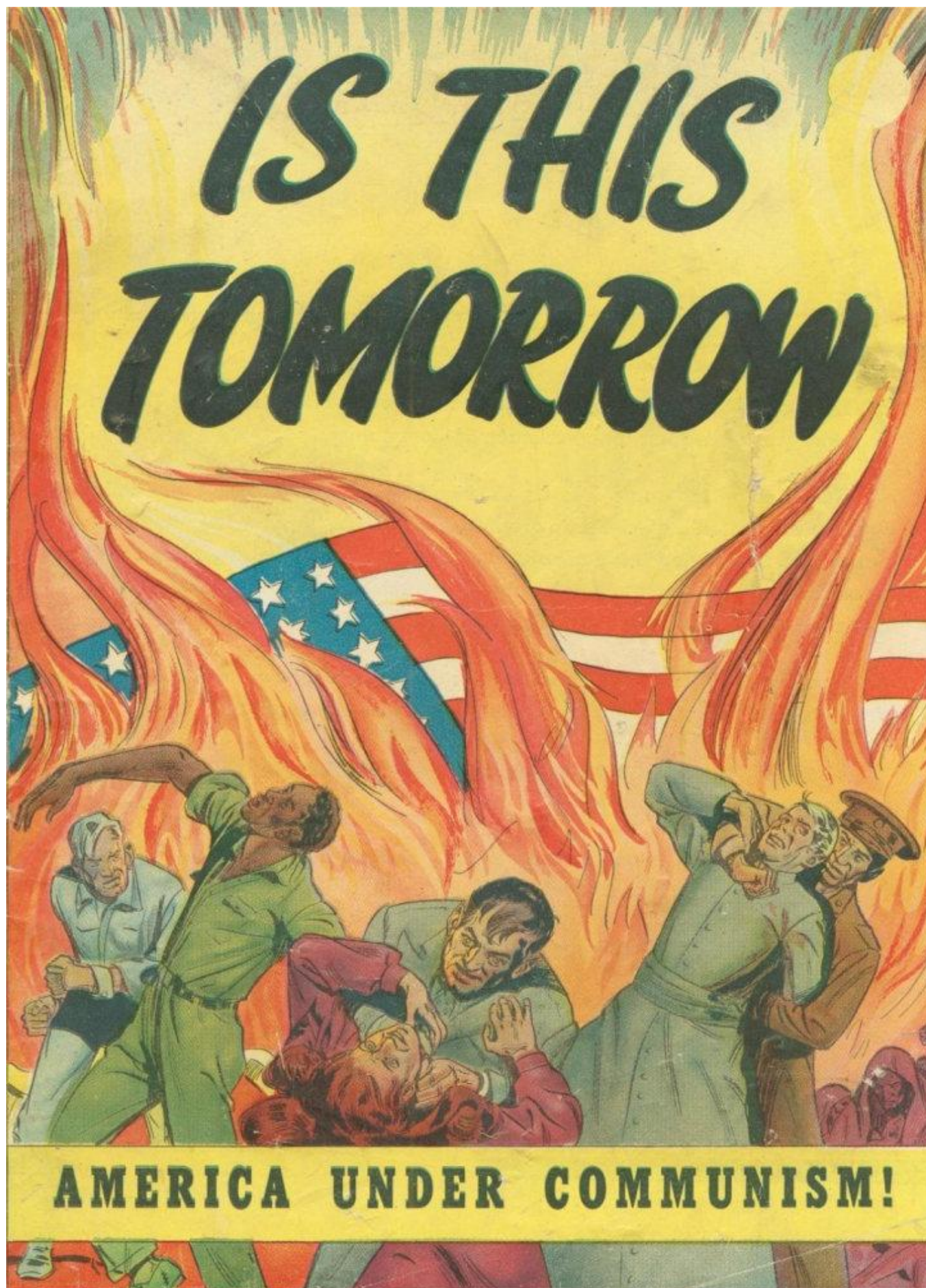
**A Masonic Blueprint  
for the Subversion of  
The Catholic Church**



# CULTURAL REVOLUTION









**Kids, they are faking events**



**to promote communism.**

**"So you see kids, there's this Worldwide Jewish Cult among us who are financially enslaving everyone by controlling the money supply and starting wars to**



**create a One World Government. These psychotic little Jew bastards are planning to rule as gods over all the non Jews. We have to stop these maniacal fucktards before it too late".**

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In August 1963, Chairman Mao received a group of African guerrilla fighters in the State Council meeting hall, an elegant wood-panelled pavilion in the heart of the leadership compound in Beijing. One of the young visitors, a big, square-shouldered man from Southern Rhodesia, had a question. He believed that the red star shining over the Kremlin had slipped away. The Soviets, who used to help the revolutionaries, now sold weapons to their enemies. 'What I worry about is this,' he said. 'Will the red star over Tiananmen Square in China go out? Will you abandon us and sell arms to our oppressors as well?' Mao became pensive, puffing on his cigarette. 'I understand your question,' he observed. 'It is that the USSR has turned revisionist and has betrayed the revolution. Can I guarantee to you that China won't betray the revolution? Right now I can't give you that guarantee. We are searching very hard to find the way to keep China from becoming corrupt, bureaucratic and revisionist.'<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, on 1 June 1966, an incendiary editorial in the *People's Daily* exhorted readers to 'Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!' It was the opening shot of the Cultural Revolution, urging people to denounce representatives of the bourgeoisie who were out to 'deceive, fool and benumb the working people in order to consolidate their reactionary state power'. As if this were not enough, it soon came to light that four of the top leaders in the party had been placed under arrest, accused of plotting against the Chairman. The mayor of Beijing was among them. He had tried, under the very nose of the people, to turn the capital into a citadel of revisionism. Counter-revolutionaries had sneaked into the party, the government and the army, trying to lead the country down the road to capitalism. Now was the beginning of a new revolution in China, as the people were encouraged to stand up and flush out all those trying to transform the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

Who, precisely, these counter-revolutionaries were, and how they had managed to worm their way into the party, was unclear, but the number-one representative of modern revisionism was the Soviet leader and party secretary Nikita Khrushchev. In a secret speech in 1956 that shook the socialist camp to the core, Khrushchev had demolished the reputation of his predecessor Joseph Stalin, detailing the horrors of his rule and attacking the cult of personality. Two years later, Khrushchev proposed 'peaceful coexistence' with the West, a concept that true believers around the world, including the young guerrilla fighter from Southern Rhodesia, viewed as a betrayal of the principles of revolutionary communism.

Mao, who had modelled himself on Stalin, felt personally threatened by deStalinisation. He must have wondered how Khrushchev could have single-handedly engineered such a complete reversal of policy in the mighty Soviet Union, the first socialist country in the world. Its founder Vladimir Lenin had, after all, successfully overcome concerted attacks from foreign powers after the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, and Stalin had survived the assault of Nazi Germany a quarter of a century later. The answer was that too little had been done to remould the way people thought. The bourgeoisie was gone, but bourgeois ideology still held sway, making it possible for a few people at the top to erode and finally subvert the entire system.

In communist parlance, after the socialist transformation of the ownership of the means of production had been completed, a new revolution was required to stamp out once and for all the remnants of bourgeois culture, from private thoughts to private markets. Just as the transition from capitalism to socialism required a revolution, the transition from socialism to communism demanded a revolution too: Mao called it the Cultural Revolution.

It was a bold project, one that aimed to eradicate all traces of the past. But behind all the theoretical justifications lay an ageing dictator's determination to shore up his own standing in world history. Mao was sure of his own greatness, of which he spoke constantly, and saw himself as the leading light of communism. It was not all hubris. The Chairman had led a quarter of humanity to liberation, and had then succeeded in fighting the imperialist camp to a standstill during the Korean War.

The Chairman's first attempt to steal the Soviet Union's thunder was the Great Leap Forward in 1958, when people in the countryside were herded into giant collectives called people's communes. By substituting labour for capital and harnessing the vast potential of the masses, he thought that he could catapult his country past its competitors. Mao was convinced that he had found the golden bridge to communism, making him the messiah leading humanity to a world of plenty for all. But the Great Leap Forward was a disastrous experiment which cost the lives of tens of millions of people.

The Cultural Revolution was Mao's second attempt to become the historical pivot around which the socialist universe revolved. Lenin had carried out the Great October Socialist Revolution, setting a precedent for the proletariat of the whole world. But modern revisionists like Khrushchev had usurped the leadership of the party, leading the Soviet Union back on the road of capitalist restoration. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was the second stage in the history of the international communist movement, safeguarding the dictatorship of the proletariat against revisionism. The foundation piles of the communist future were being driven in China, as the Chairman guided the oppressed and downtrodden people of the world towards freedom. Mao was the one who inherited, defended and developed Marxism-Leninism into a new stage, that of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

Like many dictators, Mao combined grandiose ideas about his own historical destiny with an extraordinary capacity for malice. He was easily offended and resentful, with a long memory for grievances. Insensitive to human loss, he nonchalantly handed down killing quotas in the many campaigns that were designed to cow the population. As he became older, he increasingly turned on his colleagues and subordinates, some of them longstanding comrades-in-arms, subjecting them to public humiliation, imprisonment and torture. The Cultural Revolution, then, was also about an old man settling personal scores at the end of his life. These two aspects of the Cultural Revolution – the vision of a socialist world free of revisionism, the sordid, vengeful plotting against real and imaginary enemies – were not mutually exclusive. Mao saw no distinction between himself and the revolution. He was the revolution. An inkling of dissatisfaction with his authority was a direct threat to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

And there were many challenges to his position. In 1956, some of the Chairman's closest allies had used Khrushchev's secret speech to delete all references to Mao Zedong Thought from the constitution and criticise the cult of personality. Mao was seething, yet had little choice but to acquiesce. The biggest setback, however, came in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, a catastrophe on an unprecedented scale directly caused by his own obstinate policies. Mao was hardly paranoid in believing that many of his colleagues wanted him to step down, holding him responsible for the mass starvation of ordinary people. Plenty of rumours were circulating, accusing him of being deluded, innumerate and dangerous. His entire legacy was in jeopardy. The Chairman feared that he would meet the same fate as Stalin, denounced after his death. Who would become China's Khrushchev?

There were quite a few candidates, starting with Peng Dehuai, a marshal who had written a letter in the summer of 1959, criticising the Great Leap Forward. But Liu Shaoqi, the number two in the party, was a still more plausible contender for the title, having described the famine as a man-made disaster before thousands of assembled party leaders in January 1962. The moment the conference was over, Mao started clearing the ground for a purge. As he put it in December 1964, 'We must punish this party of ours.'<sup>2</sup>

But Mao carefully concealed his strategy. The rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution was deliberately vague, as 'class enemies', 'capitalist roaders' and 'revisionists' were denounced in general terms. Few leading party officials would have felt threatened, since by 1965 there were no real 'capitalist roaders' inside the upper ranks of the party, least of all Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, the party's general secretary. Although they were the main targets of the Chairman's wrath, they had no inkling of what was coming. Liu, between 1962 and 1965, presided over one of the most vicious purges of the communist party in modern history, punishing 5 million party members. He was desperate to prove himself a worthy successor to the Chairman.

Deng, on the other hand, was one of the most vociferous critics of Soviet revisionism. Leonid Brezhnev, who assumed power in 1964, called him an ‘anti-Soviet dwarf’. Both men were vocal supporters of the Chairman, assisting him in purging the early victims of the Cultural Revolution, including the unwitting mayor of Beijing.

Mao set about ensnaring his enemies with the precision of a trapper. But once the stage was set and the Cultural Revolution erupted in the summer of 1966, it took on a life of its own, with unintended consequences that even the most consummate strategist could not have anticipated. Mao wished to purge the higher echelons of power, so he could hardly rely on the party machine to get the job done. He turned to young, radical students instead, some of them no older than fourteen, giving them licence to denounce all authority and ‘bombard the headquarters’. But party officials had honed their survival skills during decades of political infighting, and few were about to be outflanked by a group of screaming, self-righteous Red Guards. Many deflected the violence away from themselves by encouraging the youngsters to raid the homes of class enemies, stigmatised as social outcasts. Some cadres even managed to organise their own Red Guards, all in the name of Mao Zedong Thought and the Cultural Revolution. In the parlance of the time, they ‘raised the red flag in order to fight the red flag’. The Red Guards started fighting each other, divided over who the true ‘capitalist roaders’ inside the party were. In some places, party activists and factory workers rallied in support of their besieged leaders.

In response, the Chairman urged the population at large to join the revolution, calling on all to ‘seize power’ and overthrow the ‘bourgeois power holders’. The result was a social explosion on an unprecedented scale, as every pent-up frustration caused by years of communist rule was released. There was no lack of people who harboured grievances against party officials. But the ‘revolutionary masses’, instead of neatly sweeping away all followers of the ‘bourgeois reactionary line’, also became divided, as different factions jostled for power and started fighting each other. Mao used the people during the Cultural Revolution; but, equally, many people manipulated the campaign to pursue their own goals.

By January 1967 the chaos was such that the army intervened, seeking to push through the revolution and bring the situation under control by supporting the ‘true proletarian left’. As different military leaders supported different factions, all of them equally certain they represented the true voice of Mao Zedong, the country slid into civil war.

Still, the Chairman prevailed. He was cold and calculating, but also erratic, whimsical and fitful, thriving in willed chaos. He improvised, bending and breaking millions along the way. He may not have been in control, but he was always in charge, relishing a game in which he could constantly rewrite the rules. Periodically he stepped in to rescue a loyal follower or, contrariwise, to throw a close colleague to the wolves. A mere utterance of his decided the fates of countless people, as he declared one or another faction to be ‘counter-revolutionary’. His verdict could change overnight, feeding a seemingly endless cycle of violence in which people scrambled to prove their loyalty to the Chairman.

The first phase of the Cultural Revolution came to an end in the summer of 1968 as new, so-called ‘revolutionary party committees’ took over the party and the state. They were heavily dominated by military officers, concentrating real power in the hands of the army. They represented a simplified chain of command that the Chairman relished, one in which his orders could be carried out instantly and without question. Over the next three years, they turned the country into a garrison state, with soldiers overseeing schools, factories and government units. At first, millions of undesirable elements, including students and others who had taken the Chairman at his word, were banished to the countryside to be ‘re-educated by the peasants’. Then followed a series of brutal purges, used by the revolutionary party committees to eradicate all those who had spoken out at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The talk was no longer of ‘capitalist roaders’, but of ‘traitors’, ‘renegades’ and ‘spies’, as special committees were set up to examine alleged enemy links among ordinary people and erstwhile leaders alike. After a nationwide witch-hunt came a sweeping campaign against corruption, further cowing the population into submission, as almost every act and every utterance became potentially criminal. In some provinces over one in fifty people were implicated in one purge or another.

But Mao was wary of the military, in particular Lin Biao, who took over the Ministry of Defence from Peng Dehuai in the summer of 1959 and pioneered the study of Mao Zedong Thought in the army. Mao had used Lin Biao to launch and sustain the Cultural Revolution, but the marshal in turn exploited the turmoil to expand his own power base, placing his followers in key positions throughout the army. He died in a mysterious plane crash in September 1971, bringing to an end the grip of the military on civilian life.

By now, the revolutionary frenzy had exhausted almost everyone. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, many ordinary people, wary of the one-party state, had offered no more than outward compliance, keeping their innermost thoughts and personal feelings to themselves. Now many of them realised that the party had been badly damaged by the Cultural Revolution. They used the opportunity quietly to pursue their lives, even as the Chairman continued to play one faction against the other during his final years in power. In the countryside in particular, if the Great Leap Forward had destroyed the credibility of the party, the Cultural Revolution undermined its organisation. In a silent revolution, millions upon millions of villagers surreptitiously reconnected with traditional practices, as they opened black markets, shared out collective assets, divided the land and operated underground factories. Even before Mao died in September 1976, large parts of the countryside had abandoned the planned economy.

It was to be one of the most enduring legacies of a decade of chaos and entrenched fear. No communist party would have tolerated organised confrontation, but cadres in the countryside were defenceless against myriad daily acts of quiet defiance and endless subterfuge, as people tried to sap the economic dominance of the state and replace it with their own initiative and ingenuity. Deng Xiaoping, assuming the reins of power a few years after the death of Mao, briefly tried to resurrect the planned economy, but soon realised that he had little choice but to go with the flow. The people’s communes, backbone of the collectivised economy, were dissolved in 1982.<sup>3</sup>

The gradual undermining of the planned economy was one unintended outcome of the Cultural Revolution. Another was the destruction of the remnants of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. By the time Mao died, not only were people in the countryside pushing for much greater economic opportunities, but many had also broken free of the ideological shackles imposed by decades of Maoism. Endless campaigns of thought reform produced widespread scepticism even among the party members themselves.

But there was also a much darker heritage. Even if, in terms of human loss, the Cultural Revolution was far less murderous than many earlier campaigns, in particular the catastrophe unleashed during Mao’s Great Famine, it left a trail of broken lives and cultural devastation. By all accounts, during the ten years spanning the Cultural Revolution, between 1.5 and 2 million people were killed, but many more lives were ruined through endless denunciations, false confessions, struggle meetings and persecution campaigns. Anne Thurston has written eloquently that the Cultural Revolution was neither a sudden disaster nor a holocaust, but an extreme situation characterised by loss at many levels, ‘loss of culture and of spiritual values, loss of status and honour, loss of career, loss of dignity’, and, of course, loss of trust and predictability in human relations, as people turned against each other.<sup>4</sup>

The extent of loss varied enormously from one person to the next. Some lives were crushed, while others managed to get through the daily grind relatively unscathed. A few even managed to flourish, especially during the last years of the Cultural Revolution. The sheer variety of human experience during the final decade of the Maoist era, one which resists sweeping theoretical explanations, becomes all the more evident as we abandon the corridors of power to focus on people from all walks of life. As the subtitle of the book indicates, the people take centre stage.

A people’s history of the Cultural Revolution would have been unimaginable even a few years ago, when most evidence still came from official party documents and Red Guard publications. But over the past few years increasingly large amounts of primary material from the party archives in China



have become available to historians. This book is part of a trilogy, and like its two predecessors, it draws on hundreds of archival documents, the majority of them used here for the first time. There are details of the victims of Red Guards, statistics on political purges, inquiries into conditions in the countryside, surveys of factories and workshops, police reports on black markets, even letters of complaint written by villagers, and much more besides.

There are, of course, many published memoirs on the Cultural Revolution, and they too have found their way into this book. In order to complement some of the more popular ones, for instance Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* or Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, I have read through dozens of self-published autobiographies, a relatively recent publishing phenomenon. They are called *ziyinshu* in Chinese, a literal translation of *samizdat*, although they are a far cry from the censored documents that were passed around by dissidents in the Soviet Union. Many are written by the rank and file of the party or even by ordinary people, and they offer insights that cannot be gleaned from official accounts. An equally important source are interviews, some openly available, others gathered specifically for this book.

A wealth of secondary material is also available to readers interested in the Cultural Revolution. From the moment that the Red Guards appeared on the stage, they captured the imagination of both professional sinologists and the wider public. Standard bibliographies on the Cultural Revolution now list thousands of articles and books in English alone, and this body of work has immeasurably advanced our understanding of the Maoist era.<sup>5</sup> But ordinary people are often missing from these studies. This book brings together the broader historical sweep with the stories of the men and women at the centre of this human drama. From the leaders at the top of the regime down to impoverished villagers, people faced extraordinarily difficult circumstances, and the sheer complexity of the decisions they took undermines the picture of complete conformity that is often supposed to have characterised the last decade of the Mao era. The combined total of their choices ultimately pushed the country in a direction very much at odds with the one envisaged by the Chairman: instead of fighting the remnants of bourgeois culture, they subverted the planned economy and hollowed out the party's ideology. In short, they buried Maoism.



# Chronology

25 February 1956:

At the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev denounces the brutal purges, mass deportations and executions without trial under Stalin.

Autumn 1956:

At the Eighth Chinese Communist Party Congress, a reference to ‘Mao Zedong Thought’ is removed from the party constitution and the cult of personality denounced.

Winter 1956–spring 1957:

Mao, overriding most of his colleagues, encourages a more open political climate with the Hundred Flowers campaign. People demonstrate, protest and strike across the country.

Summer 1957:

The campaign backfires as a mounting barrage of criticism questions the very right of the party to rule. Mao changes tack and accuses these critical voices of being ‘bad elements’ bent on destroying the party. He puts Deng Xiaoping in charge of an anti-rightist campaign, which persecutes half a million people. The party unites behind its Chairman, who unleashes the Great Leap Forward a few months later.

1958–1961:

During the Great Leap Forward, villagers everywhere are herded into giant collectives called people’s communes. In the following years, tens of millions of people die of torture, exhaustion, disease and hunger.

January 1962:

At an enlarged party gathering of thousands of cadres in Beijing, Liu Shaoqi describes the famine as a man-made disaster. Support for Mao is at an all-time low.

Summer 1962:

Mao condemns the breaking up of collective land and promotes the slogan ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’.

Autumn 1962:

A Socialist Education Campaign is launched to educate people on the benefits of socialism and to clamp down on economic activities that take place outside the planned economy.

1963–4:

Liu Shaoqi throws his weight behind the Socialist Education Campaign and sends his wife Wang Guangmei to the countryside to head a work team. Entire provinces are accused of taking the ‘capitalist road’. Over 5 million party members are punished.

16 October 1964:

China explodes its first atom bomb.

October–November 1964:

Khrushchev is deposed in a bloodless coup in Moscow. At a Kremlin reception a few weeks later, an inebriated Soviet minister advises a delegation headed by Zhou Enlai to get rid of Mao.

January 1965:

Mao has the guidelines of the Socialist Education Campaign rewritten, aiming at ‘people in positions of authority within the party who take the capitalist road’.

10 November 1965:

Yao Wenyuan publishes an essay alleging that a play entitled *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*, written by Wu Han, a prominent historian and vice-mayor of Beijing, obliquely criticises the Great Leap Forward.

8–15 December 1965:

Mao, on the advice of Lin Biao, removes Luo Ruiqing as chief of staff of the army.

7 May 1966:

Mao writes a letter to Lin Biao projecting a utopian vision of military organisation and political indoctrination in which the army and the people fuse to become indistinct. This letter will later be known as the 7 May Directive.

4–27 May 1966:

Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing and Wu Han’s superior, as well as Luo Ruiqing, Lu Dingyi and Yang Shangkun are accused of anti-party crimes. An inner-party document entitled the 16 May Circular accuses ‘representatives of the bourgeoisie’ of having penetrated the ranks of the party and the state.

25 May 1966:

Nie Yuanzi puts up a big-character poster in Peking University accusing its leadership of being ‘a bunch of Khrushchev-type revisionist elements’.

28 May 1966:

A Cultural Revolution Group is established, headed by Chen Boda and including Madame Mao (Jiang Qing), Kang Sheng, Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao.

1 June 1966:

The *People’s Daily* exhorts the nation to ‘Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!’ School classes are suspended across the country.

June–July 1966:

Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping dispatch work teams to middle schools and colleges to lead the Cultural Revolution. They soon clash with some of the more outspoken students, denouncing them as ‘rightists’.

16 July 1966:

Mao swims in the Yangtze, signalling his determination to carry through the Cultural Revolution.

1 August 1966:

Mao writes a letter in support of a group of students who, inspired by the 7 May Directive, call themselves Red Guards and vow to fight against those who conspire to lead the country back to capitalism. Students throughout China form Red Guard units, attacking people from a bad class background.

5 August 1966:  
The *People's Daily* publishes Mao's own big-character poster, entitled 'Bombard the Headquarters'. Mao accuses 'leading comrades' who have dispatched work teams of having adopted the 'reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie' and organised a reign of 'white terror'. Students labelled as 'rightists' are rehabilitated.

12 August 1966:  
At a plenum of the Central Committee, Lin Biao replaces Liu Shaoqi as second-in-command.

18 August 1966:  
Mao, wearing a military uniform and a Red Guard armband, welcomes a million students in Tiananmen Square. Over the following months, he reviews a total of 12 million Red Guards in Beijing.

23 August 1966:  
The *People's Daily* applauds Red Guard violence and their campaign to destroy all remnants of the old society.

5 September 1966:  
Red Guards are given free transportation and accommodation. Many come to Beijing to be reviewed by the Chairman, while others travel the country to establish revolutionary networks, attacking local party authorities as 'capitalist roaders'.

3 October 1966:  
Party organisations beleaguered by Red Guards ask for help, but instead of supporting them, the party journal *Red Flag*, edited by Chen Boda, publishes an editorial denouncing 'counter-revolutionary revisionists' inside the ranks of the party who follow a 'bourgeois reactionary line'.

1 November 1966:  
A further *Red Flag* editorial accuses leading party members of 'treating the masses as if they were ignorant and incapable', unleashing ordinary people against their party leaders and encouraging them to set up rebel organisations.

26 December 1966:  
Madame Mao meets representatives of a newly forged nationwide alliance of temporary workers and demands that all those who have been dismissed since the start of the Cultural Revolution for criticising party leaders be reinstated. That evening, as he turns seventy-three, the Chairman gives a toast to welcome 'the unfolding of a nationwide civil war'.

6 January 1967:  
In what will become known as the 'January Storm', a million rebel workers seize power from the municipal party committee in Shanghai. The Chairman encourages rebels elsewhere to 'seize power'.

23 January 1967:  
The army is ordered to support the 'revolutionary masses'.

11 and 16 February 1967:  
At a meeting of the central leadership chaired by Zhou Enlai, several veteran marshals take members of the Cultural Revolution Group to task. Mao soon denounces them, prompting an even greater shift of power towards Lin Biao and the Cultural Revolution Group.

6 April 1967:  
In some parts of the country, the army, ordered to assist the 'proletarian left', sides instead with party leaders. On 6 April new directives prohibit the army from firing on rebels, disbanding mass organisations or retaliating against those who raid military commands.

May 1967:  
Factional violence, in which the military is often involved, spreads across the country.

20 July 1967:  
In Wuhan local soldiers abduct two envoys of the Cultural Revolution Group who are seen as favouring a rebel faction in their mediation between two opposing forces there. Lin Biao portrays the incident as a mutiny by the regional military commander and urges the Chairman, on a secret visit to the city, to leave immediately for Shanghai.

25 July 1967:  
The Cultural Revolution Group members arrested in Wuhan are welcomed back to Beijing, where the incident is denounced as a 'counter-revolutionary riot'. Lin Biao uses the occasion further to tighten his grip on the army.

1 August 1967:  
A *Red Flag* editorial hails Lin Biao as the most faithful follower of the Chairman and demands that 'capitalist roaders' be removed from the army. Throughout the summer, armed conflicts between different factions spread across the country.

22 August 1967:  
A rebel faction at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs critical of Zhou Enlai sets the British mission in Beijing on fire.

30 August 1967:  
The Chairman reins in the violence and has several members of the Cultural Revolution Group arrested. A few days later, mass organisations are once again forbidden from seizing weapons from the military.

September 1967:  
Mao tours the country, calling for a great alliance of all revolutionary forces.

22 March 1968:  
Lin Biao further consolidates his hold on the army by having several military leaders arrested.

27 July 1968:  
A Mao Zedong Thought propaganda team is sent to Tsinghua University, marking the end of the Red Guards, who are brought to heel and disciplined.

7 September 1968:  
With revolutionary committees established in all provinces and major cities, Zhou Enlai announces an all-round victory.

Summer 1968–autumn 1969:  
The new revolutionary committees use a campaign to 'cleanse the party ranks' to denounce their enemies as 'spies' and 'traitors'.

22 December 1968:  
The *People's Daily* publishes a directive from the Chairman ordering that students in the cities be re-educated in the countryside. Between 1968 and 1980, some 17 million students in all will be banished from the cities.

March 1969:  
Weeks before the Ninth Party Congress, Chinese and Soviet troops clash along the Ussuri River. Lin Biao uses the incident to militarise the country even further.

April 1969:  
At the Ninth Party Congress, Lin Biao is designated as Mao's successor.

February–November 1970:  
Two overlapping campaigns, referred to as the 'One Strike and Three Antis', target 'counter-revolutionary activities' and 'economic crimes', implicating up to one in every fifty people and cowing the population.

Summer 1970:  
Mao uses the issue of the post of president of state to question Lin Biao's loyalty.

April 1971:  
The Chairman invites the United States table-tennis team to visit China.

Summer 1971:  
The Chairman tours the south of the country, undermining Lin Biao without ever mentioning him by name.

12 September 1971:  
Mao returns to Beijing. Just after midnight, Lin Biao, his wife and son hurriedly board a plane outside the summer resort of Beidaihe. The plane crashes in Mongolia, killing all aboard.

21–28 February 1972:  
President Richard Nixon visits China.

August 1972:  
The military return to their barracks. Over the following months many government administrators and party cadres are rehabilitated.

November 1973–January 1974:  
Madame Mao, Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen and Yao Wenyuan band together against Zhou Enlai and are soon referred to as the 'Gang of Four'. A nationwide campaign aimed at Zhou is launched.

April 1974:  
The Chairman promotes Deng Xiaoping, who heads the Chinese delegation at the United Nations.

January 1975:  
With the approval of the Chairman, Zhou Enlai launches the 'Four Modernisations' programme to upgrade China's agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology.

November 1975–January 1976:  
Mao fears that Deng Xiaoping will undermine his legacy. Deng is taken to task at several party meetings and removed from most of his official positions.

8 January 1976:  
Premier Zhou Enlai dies.

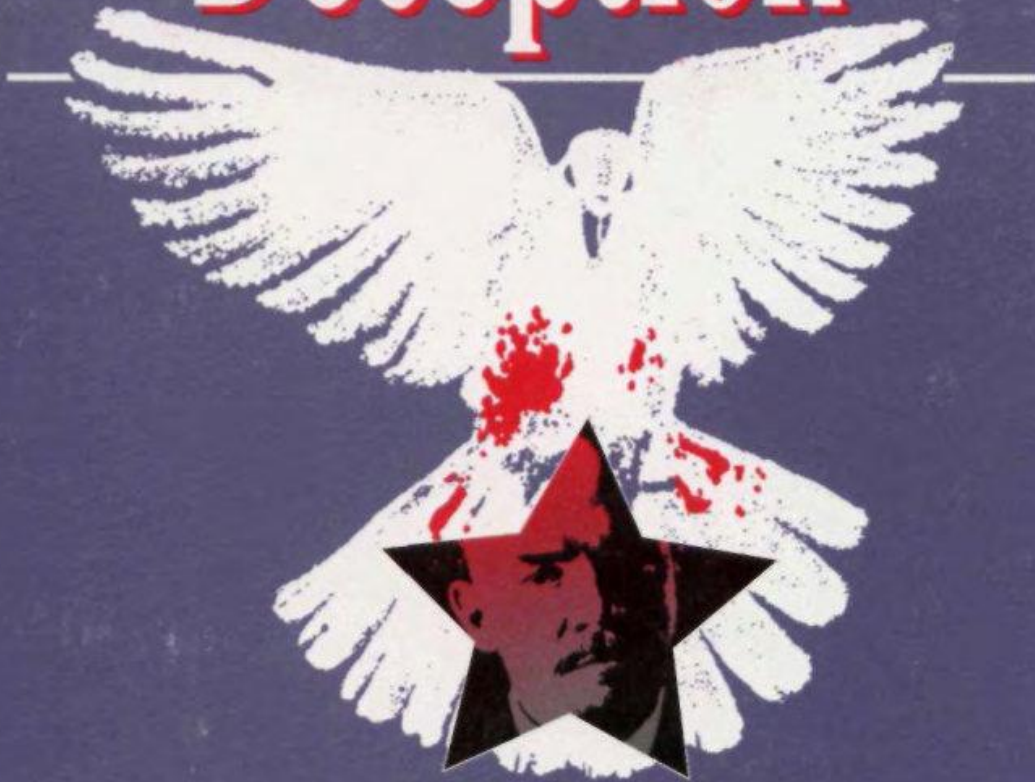
4–5 April 1976:  
An outpouring of popular support for Zhou Enlai culminates in a massive demonstration on Tiananmen Square, brutally repressed by the police and the army.

9 September 1976:  
Mao Zedong dies.





# The Perestroika Deception



The world's slide towards  
THE 'SECOND OCTOBER REVOLUTION'  
['WELTOKTOBER']

**Anatoliy Golitsyn**

Author of 'New Lies For Old'



## Two Dictators

At the heart of Beijing, a vast, monolithic building with marble columns and pillars casts a shadow over Tiananmen Square, much as the Communist Party of China dominates the political life of the country. The Great Hall of the People was built in record time to be ready for the tenth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution, celebrated with much fanfare in October 1959. It is a grand, intimidating structure, heavily inspired by Soviet architecture, with a large auditorium that can seat over 10,000 delegates. A giant red star surrounded by hundreds of lights shines down from the ceiling. Everything is drenched in red, from the banners and curtains on the podium to the thick carpet on the gallery and balconies. There are also dozens of cavernous rooms named after the provinces of the country, giving the building more floor space than the Forbidden City, the sprawling ancient quarter of pavilions, courtyards and palaces that had served the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties, facing Tiananmen Square.

In January 1962, some 7,000 cadres arrived from all parts of the country to attend the largest conference ever held in the Great Hall of the People. They had been called to Beijing because the leadership needed their support. For several years they had worked under relentless pressure, as Chairman Mao had set ever higher targets, from steel output to grain production. Those who failed to meet the quotas were labelled rightists and purged from the party. They were replaced by hard, unscrupulous men who trimmed their sails to benefit from the radical winds blowing from Beijing. Many lied about their achievements, inventing the production figures reported to their masters higher up the echelons of power. Others imposed a reign of terror during which the villagers under their supervision were worked to death. Now they were being blamed for the catastrophe unleashed by Mao with the Great Leap Forward.

Four years earlier, in 1958, Mao had thrown his country into a frenzy, as villagers were herded into giant people's communes that heralded a great leap from socialism into communism. People were conscripted to fight in a continuous revolution and forced to tackle one task after another, from giant water-conservancy projects during the slack winter months to steel production in backyard furnaces over the summer. 'Battle Hard for Three Years to Change the Face of China' was one slogan of the Great Leap Forward, as a world of plenty beckoned ahead. 'Catch up with Britain and Overtake the United States' was another. But despite the propaganda about outstripping capitalist economies, Mao's real aim was to propel China past the Soviet Union. Ever since the death of Stalin in 1953, Mao had wished to claim leadership of the socialist camp.

Even during Stalin's lifetime, Mao had considered himself a more accomplished revolutionary. It was he who had brought a quarter of humanity into the socialist camp in 1949, not Stalin. And it was he who had fought the Americans to a standstill in Korea a year later, not Stalin. But Mao was also a faithful follower of his master in Moscow, and for good reason. From the start, the Chinese Communist Party had been dependent on financial help and political guidance from the Soviet Union. Stalin personally assisted Mao's rise to power. The relationship between the two men was often tumultuous, but once the red flag flew over Beijing in 1949, Mao wasted no time in imposing a harsh communist regime modelled on the Soviet Union. Mao was a Stalinist attracted to the collectivisation of agriculture, an unlimited cult of the leader, the elimination of private property, all-pervasive control of the lives of ordinary people and huge expenditure on national defence.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, it was Stalin, fearing the emergence of a powerful neighbour that might threaten his dominance, who constrained the Stalinisation of China. In 1929–30, Stalin had launched a ruthless campaign of dekulakisation, resulting in the execution of thousands of people classified as 'rich peasants' and the deportation of close to 2 million to labour camps in Siberia and Soviet Central Asia. But in 1950 Stalin advised Mao to leave the economy of the rich peasants intact so as to speed up China's recovery after years of civil war. Mao ignored his advice, forcing rural populations to participate in the denunciation, and sometimes murder, of traditional village leaders. All the assets of the victims were handed over to the crowd. The land was measured and distributed to the poor. By implicating a majority in the murder of a carefully designated minority, Mao managed permanently to link the people to the party. No reliable figure exists for the number of victims killed during land redistribution, but between 1947 and 1952 it is unlikely to have been less than 1.5 to 2 million people. Many other millions were stigmatised as exploiters and class enemies.

Once land reform had been completed in 1952, Mao approached Stalin with a request for a large loan to help China's industrialisation. Stalin, ever the contrarian, rebuffed his plea by judging that the growth rate that China sought to pursue was 'rash'. He imposed deep cuts, vetoed several projects related to military defence and reduced the number of industrial complexes to be built with Soviet assistance. Yet Stalin himself had presided over the collectivisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1933, using the grain he extracted from collective farms in the countryside to feed a growing industrial workforce and pay for imports of machinery from the West. The experience led to mass starvation in the Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union. The death toll has been estimated at 5 to 10 million people.

Stalin was the only person capable of restraining Mao. After the death of his master in Moscow in March 1953, Mao cranked up the pace of collectivisation. A monopoly on grain was introduced by the end of the year, forcing farmers to sell their crops at prices fixed by the state. In 1955–6, collectives resembling state farms in the Soviet Union were introduced. They took back the land from the farmers, transforming the villagers into bonded servants at the beck and call of the state. In the cities all commerce and industry also became functions of the state, as the government expropriated private enterprises, small shops and large industries alike. Mao termed this the Socialist High Tide.

But in 1956 Mao's programme of crash collectivisation encountered a huge setback. On 25 February, the final day of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev denounced the brutal purges, mass deportations and executions without trial under Stalin. Speaking for several hours without interruption in the Great Kremlin Palace, the former Moscow residence of the Russian tsars, Khrushchev criticised Stalin's cult of personality and accused his erstwhile master of ruining agriculture in the early 1930s. Stalin, he said, 'never went anywhere, never met with workers and collective farmers' and knew the country only from 'films that dressed up and prettified the situation in the countryside'. Mao interpreted this as a personal attack on his own authority. He was, after all, China's Stalin, and Khrushchev's speech was bound to raise questions about his own leadership, in particular the personality cult surrounding him. Within months, premier Zhou Enlai and others used Khrushchev's critique of state farms to check the pace of collectivisation. It looked as if Mao was being sidelined.

Mao's response to deStalinisation came on 25 April 1956. When addressing a meeting of the Politburo, he championed the ordinary man. He posed as a protector of democratic values in order to regain moral leadership over the party. Mao outdid Khrushchev. Two months earlier he had been forced on the defensive, seemingly an ageing dictator out of touch with reality clinging to a model that had failed in the past. Now he reclaimed the initiative, striking a far more liberal and conciliatory tone than his counterpart in Moscow. A week later, on 2 May, he encouraged freedom of expression among intellectuals, asking the party to 'let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools contend'.

Still, Mao was forced to make major concessions to his colleagues. At the Eighth Party Congress, convened in September to elect the first new Central Committee since 1945, the Socialist High Tide was quietly dropped, all references to Mao Zedong Thought deleted from the constitution and the

cult of personality denounced. Collective leadership was praised. Hemmed in by Khrushchev's secret speech, Mao had little choice but to acquiesce in these measures. While he retained the chairmanship of the party, he indicated that he wanted to relinquish the chairmanship of the state, a largely ceremonial position he disliked. Seeking to test his colleagues' loyalty, he hinted that he might want to step back for health reasons. But, instead of begging him to remain, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping created a new position of honorary chairman, for Mao to take up as soon as he resigned the chairmanship of the party. In private, the infuriated Mao did not hide his anger.<sup>2</sup>

The Hungarian revolt gave Mao an opportunity to regain the upper hand. As Soviet troops crushed the rebels in Budapest in early November, the Chairman blamed the Hungarian Communist Party for having brought misfortune on itself by failing to listen to popular grievances and allowing them to fester and spiral out of control. The danger in China, he opined, was not so much popular unrest as rigid adherence to party policy. 'The party needs to be given some lessons. It is a good thing that students demonstrate against us.' He wanted the communist party to welcome critical views from outsiders in a great reckoning: 'Those who insult the masses should be liquidated by the masses.'<sup>3</sup>

Encouraged by Mao's call for more open debate in May, discontented people from all walks of life had begun to speak out. The Hungarian revolt further fuelled popular unrest, as students and workers started invoking Budapest in acts of defiance against the state. Hundreds of students gathered in front of the mayor's office in Nanjing to chant slogans in favour of democracy and human rights. In cities across the country, workers went on strike, complaining of decreasing real income, poor housing and dwindling welfare benefits. In Shanghai some demonstrations attracted thousands of supporters.

The unrest was not confined to the cities. By the winter of 1956–7, farmers started withdrawing from the collectives, raising a clamour against the party and beating up local cadres who stood in their way. In parts of Guangdong province, across the border from Hong Kong, up to a third of the villagers forcibly took back the land and started planting their own crops. In other parts of the country, too, villagers left the collectives in droves, claiming their cattle, seed and tools, determined to make it on their own.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Chairman himself had posed as a champion of the people and defended their democratic rights to express themselves, the party was in no position to clamp down on popular opposition. In February 1957, Mao went further by encouraging intellectuals who had remained on the sidelines to speak out. His voice rang with sincerity as he enumerated examples of serious errors made by the communist party, accusing it in harsh terms of 'dogmatism', 'bureaucratism' and 'subjectivism'. Mao appealed to the public at large to help party officials improve their work by airing their grievances so that social injustices could be redressed. In a portent of what was to come during the Cultural Revolution, Mao was using students and workers as a way of putting his comrades on notice.

Soon a torrent of criticism burst out, but Mao had badly miscalculated. He had hoped for an outpouring of adulation in which activists would follow his cues and punish a party that had sidestepped him and written his Mao Zedong Thought out of the constitution. Instead, people wrote pithy slogans in favour of democracy and human rights, some even demanding that the communist party relinquish power. Students had been striking and demonstrating sporadically since the summer of 1956, but now tens of thousands took to the streets. On 4 May 1957, some 8,000 of them converged on Beijing, marking the anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, an abortive student uprising dating back to 1919. They created a 'Democracy Wall' covered with posters and slogans charging the communist party with 'suppression of freedom and democracy in all the country's educational institutions'. In Shanghai, local cadres were reviled, insulted and jeered at by angry mobs. Major labour disturbances involving over 30,000 workers erupted in hundreds of enterprises, dwarfing anything the country had seen, even during the heyday of the nationalist regime in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

Mao was stung by the extent of popular discontent. He put Deng Xiaoping in charge of a campaign that denounced half a million students and intellectuals as 'rightists' bent on destroying the party. Many were deported to remote areas in Manchuria and Xinjiang to do hard labour.

Mao's gamble had backfired, but at least he and his comrades-in-arms were united again, determined to suppress the people. Back at the helm of the party, Mao was keen to push through the radical collectivisation of the countryside. In Moscow, where he and other communist party leaders from all over the world had been invited to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1957, he gave his showpiece pledge of allegiance to Khrushchev by recognising him as the leader of the socialist camp. But he also challenged his opposite number in Moscow. When Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would catch up with the United States in per-capita production of meat, milk and butter, Mao boldly proclaimed that China would outstrip Britain – then still considered a major industrial power – in the production of steel within fifteen years. The Great Leap Forward had just begun.

Back home, leaders like Zhou Enlai who had shown insufficient enthusiasm for the Socialist High Tide a few years earlier were taken to task, humiliated by Mao in private meetings and party conferences. Under the drumbeat of propaganda, several provincial party leaders and many of their underlings were purged and replaced by close followers of Mao, who herded the villagers into giant people's communes that heralded the leap from socialism into communism. In the countryside, people lost their homes, land, belongings and livelihoods. In collective canteens, food, distributed by the spoonful according to merit, became a weapon used to force people to follow the party's every dictate. Combined with the elimination of private property and the profit motive, these experiments resulted in a steep decline in grain output. But instead of sounding the alarm, local cadres were pressured by their superiors to report falsely ever greater yields. To protect their jobs, they handed over a correspondingly bigger share of the crop to the state, putting villagers on a starvation diet.

In the summer of 1959, as the party leaders convened in the mountain resort of Lushan for a conference, Marshal Peng Dehuai and others cautiously criticised the Great Leap Forward. At the same time, while visiting the Polish town of Poznań, Khrushchev publicly condemned the communes under Stalin. It looked like a carefully planned attack on Mao. The Chairman, suspecting a plot to overthrow him, denounced Peng and his supporters as an anti-party clique guilty of conspiring against the state and the people.

A witch-hunt against 'rightist' elements ensued, as over 3 million cadres were replaced by willing executioners, prepared to do everything it took to achieve the goals set by their Chairman. Faced with constant pressure to meet and exceed the plan, many resorted to ever greater means of coercion, resulting in an orgy of violence that became all the more extreme as the incentives to work were removed. In some places both villagers and cadres became so brutalised that the scope of intimidation had to be constantly expanded, creating an escalating spiral of violence. People who did not work hard enough were hung up and beaten; some were drowned in ponds. Others were doused in urine or forced to eat excrement. People were mutilated. A report circulated to the top leadership, including Chairman Mao, describes how a man called Wang Ziyou had one of his ears chopped off, his legs bound with wire and a 10-kilo stone dropped on his back before he was branded – as punishment for digging up a potato.<sup>6</sup> There were even cases of people being buried alive. When a boy stole a handful of grain in a Hunan village, local boss Xiong Dechang forced his father to bury his son alive. The man died of grief a few days later.<sup>7</sup>

But the most common weapon was food, as starvation became the punishment of first resort. Throughout the country those who were too ill to work were routinely deprived of food. The sick, the vulnerable and the elderly were banned from the canteen and starved to death, as cadres recited Lenin's dictum: 'he who does not work shall not eat'. Countless people were killed indirectly through neglect, as local cadres were compelled to focus on figures rather than on people, making sure they fulfilled the targets prescribed by the planners in Beijing. The experiment ended in one of the greatest

mass killings in history, with at least 45 million people worked, starved or beaten to death.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1960, the sheer scale of the catastrophe forced Mao to allow Zhou Enlai and others to introduce measures designed to weaken the power of the communes over villagers. Local markets were restored, private plots allowed once more. Grain was imported from abroad. It was the beginning of the end of mass starvation. But as the pressure to deliver grain, coal and other commodities to the state abated, some of the large cities started facing massive shortfalls. In the summer of 1961, Minister of Finance Li Xiannian announced that empty state granaries were the most pressing issue confronting the party.<sup>9</sup> The countryside was effectively cutting off Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai, forcing the centre to listen.

Mao's star was at its lowest in January 1962 during the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference – so named because of the number of attendees. If ever there had been a time to depose him, it would have been during this massive gathering, as cadres from all corners of the country finally assembled to compare notes and rail against the disaster brought by the Great Leap Forward. There were even rumours that a couple of months before the meeting, Peng Zhen, a tall, thin man with a limp hand who was mayor of Beijing, had asked one of his underlings, a party intellectual called Deng Tuo, to compile a dossier of documents critical of the famine and Mao's role in it. The investigation was carried out with the knowledge of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, and several meetings were held away from the public view in a baroque-style palace built for the empress dowager in the Beijing Zoo. Peng Zhen, it was alleged, intended to confront the Chairman.<sup>10</sup>

Decades earlier, Stalin had faced a similar challenge. During the Congress of Victors, held in the Great Hall of the Kremlin in 1934, some 2,000 delegates had assembled to celebrate the success of agricultural collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. They welcomed Stalin with rapturous applause; behind the scenes, they grumbled about his methods and feared his ambition. Critical of the extent of the cult of personality surrounding him, several leading party members met privately to discuss his replacement. Rumour had it that he received so many negative votes that some of the paper ballots had to be destroyed. Much of the dissent in the ranks was caused by the famine, for which Stalin was held responsible. However, nobody criticised the leader directly.<sup>11</sup>

In Beijing, too, Mao was applauded. Many delegates relished the opportunity to have their picture taken with the Chairman.<sup>12</sup> Not even the top leaders confronted Mao directly. But in his official report, delivered to a packed audience, Liu Shaoqi spoke at length about the famine. Liu was a dour, puritanical man with a lined and flabby face, who often worked through the night. Most leaders went bare-headed, but Liu always wore a proletarian cloth cap. A year earlier, in April 1961, he and other leaders had been sent to the countryside by Mao to investigate the famine. Liu had been genuinely shocked by the disastrous state in which he found his home village. Now he reported that the farmers in Hunan believed that the disaster was 70 per cent man-made with 30 per cent attributed to natural causes. The very use of the term 'man-made disaster' (*renhuo*) was a bombshell, drawing gasps from the audience. Liu also dismissed the expression 'nine fingers to one', Mao's favourite phrase to emphasise achievements over setbacks. The tension was palpable. 'I wonder if we can say that, generally speaking, the ratio of achievements to setbacks is seven to three, although each region is different. One finger versus nine fingers does not apply to every place. There are only a small number of regions where mistakes are equal to one finger and successes equal to nine fingers.' Mao interrupted Liu, visibly annoyed: 'It's not a small number of regions at all, for instance in Hebei only 20 per cent of regions decreased production and in Jiangsu 30 per cent of all regions increased production year after year!' Liu, refusing to be intimidated, carried on: 'In general, we cannot say it is merely one finger, but rather three, and in some places it is even more.'<sup>13</sup>

But Liu did try to defend the Great Leap Forward. As in Moscow more than thirty years before, every delegate hastened to proclaim that the 'general line' was correct. It was its implementation that was at fault.

One man in particular threw his full weight behind the Chairman. Lin Biao was widely considered one of the most brilliant strategists of the civil war. A gaunt man with a chalky-white complexion, he suffered from a wide array of phobias about water, wind and cold. The mere sound of running water gave him diarrhoea. He did not drink liquids at all, and relied on his wife feeding him steamed buns dipped in water to stay hydrated. Most of the time he wore his military cap to hide a scraggy bald head. He often called in sick, but in the summer of 1959 he had left his mole-like existence to rally to the defence of the Chairman at the Lushan plenum. In reward, his performance won him Peng Dehuai's job as head of the army. Now he eulogised the Chairman again, hailing the Great Leap Forward as an unprecedented accomplishment in Chinese history: 'The thoughts of Chairman Mao are always correct . . . He is never out of touch with reality . . . I feel very deeply that when in the past our work was done well, it was precisely when we thoroughly implemented and did not interfere with Chairman Mao's thought. Every time Chairman Mao's ideas were not sufficiently respected or suffered interference, there have been problems. That is essentially what the history of our party over the last few decades shows.'<sup>14</sup>

Mao was pleased with Lin, but suspicious of everyone else. He put on his best face, acting the fatherly, benevolent elder, 'a gentle giant spouting Chinese history, citing classical fiction, an Olympian deity ready to admit that he, too, could err'.<sup>15</sup> He tried to disarm the delegates and put them at their ease. He encouraged an open and democratic climate in which all could speak without fear of retribution. He was trying to find out where everybody stood. In the smaller discussion groups which gathered separately from the main party speeches, some delegates aired dangerously critical views. A few provincial leaders believed that the entire famine was a man-made catastrophe. Others wondered how many millions had perished, comparing notes from their respective provinces. Some even thought that the Chairman could hardly escape blame: 'Such a huge problem, Chairman Mao should assume responsibility.'<sup>16</sup> One delegate pointed out that the people's communes had been the Chairman's idea. Mao read the transcripts of these debates with great contempt: 'They complain all day long and get to watch plays at night. They eat three full meals a day – and fart. That's what Marxism-Leninism means to them.'<sup>17</sup>

But Mao did offer a token apology, admitting that as Chairman of the party he was at least in part accountable. It was an astute move, one which obliged other leaders to follow suit and acknowledge their own mistakes. A chorus of confessions followed. Zhou Enlai, for instance, took personal responsibility for excessive grain procurements, inflated production figures, the draining of grain away from the provinces and growing exports of food. A faithful and adroit assistant, with strongly marked features, large eyes under bushy eyebrows and slightly effeminate manners, he had made himself indispensable as a first-rate administrator. Early in his career as a revolutionary, Zhou had resolved never to challenge Mao, although his master still periodically abased him in front of other leaders, as in the early months of 1958, when Mao had censured Zhou for lacking sufficient enthusiasm for agricultural collectivisation. Zhou worked tirelessly at the Great Leap Forward to prove himself. Now he declared that 'shortcomings and errors of the last few years have occurred precisely when we contravened the general line and Chairman Mao's precious instructions'.<sup>18</sup> Wang Renzhong, a sycophantic follower of Mao and party secretary of Hubei, confessed that his province had misled Beijing by inflating production figures. Liu Zihou accepted that Hebei, the province under his purview, had invented the bumper harvest in several counties that Beijing had heralded as models. Zhou Lin, the boss of Guizhou, went further, acknowledging that under his leadership the villagers had been wrongly persecuted for allegedly hiding grain.<sup>19</sup>

These admissions of culpability deflected attention away from Mao. More importantly, they undercut Peng Zhen's attempt to discredit the Chairman. The lengthy report the mayor of Beijing had allegedly prepared months earlier never saw the light of day. In effect, instead of making sure that their



leader would never again be able to perpetrate a disaster, the party allowed him to save face.

Mao survived the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference. But more than ever he feared losing control of the party. In the Soviet Union, back in 1934, the Congress of Victors would turn out to be a congress of victims. Over the next four years, more than half of the 2,000 delegates were either executed or sent to the gulag. Stalin excelled at hunting down his enemies during the Great Terror. As the historian Robert Service has noted, 'his brutality was as mechanical as a badger trap'.<sup>20</sup> Mao would be much more whimsical, deliberately turning society upside down and stoking the violence of millions to retain his position at the centre.



## Never Forget Class Struggle

One of the first steps Mao took when he could no longer deny the extent of the famine was to blame it on class enemies. ‘Bad people have seized power, causing beatings, deaths, grain shortages and hunger,’ he wrote in November 1960. ‘The democratic revolution has not been completed, as feudal forces, full of hatred towards socialism, are stirring up trouble, sabotaging socialist productive forces.’<sup>1</sup> A few months later, he expressed his surprise at the extent of the counter-revolution: ‘Who would have thought that the countryside harboured so many counter-revolutionaries? We did not expect the counter-revolution to usurp power at the village level and carry out cruel acts of class revenge.’<sup>2</sup>

It was a predictable move. Decades earlier, Stalin, too, had declared that the success of collectivisation had ‘infuriated the lickspittles of the defeated classes’. As his *History of the All-Union Communist Party: A Short Course* put it, ‘they began to revenge themselves on the Party and the people for their own failure, for their own bankruptcy; they began to resort to foul play and sabotage against the cause of the workers and collective farmers, to blow up pits, set fire to factories, and commit acts of wrecking in collective and state farms, with the object of undoing the achievements of the workers and collective farmers’.<sup>3</sup>

More than 42 million copies of the *Short Course* were published in Russian alone, and it was translated into sixty-seven languages.<sup>4</sup> Chinese was one of them. The red book, as the *Short Course* was known at the time, was studied like the holy Bible in the years after 1949, when ‘The Soviet Union’s Today is Our Tomorrow’ became the motto. According to one of Mao’s secretaries, ‘Stalin’s ideas provided Mao with handy shortcuts.’ The core message of the *Short Course* was that every significant development was the result of political struggles between the correct line, represented by Lenin and Stalin, and incorrect positions, adopted by a string of anti-party groups that had been successfully eliminated on the path to socialism. The book’s prominence came to an end after Khrushchev denounced Stalin, although it was never officially repudiated.<sup>5</sup>

Mao revered the text even after 1956. Of particular importance was Stalin’s notion that ‘as the socialist revolution deepens, class struggle intensifies’. In the *Short Course*’s words, it was ‘opportunist complacency’ to assume that ‘as we grow stronger the enemy will become tamer and more inoffensive’. In reality, the exact opposite was happening, and this called for vigilance, ‘real Bolshevik revolutionary vigilance’. The enemy was no longer out there, but hiding in plain sight, inside the very ranks of the party.

At the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in January 1962, Mao had merely hinted at the issue of class struggle. ‘There are some people who adopt the guise of communist party members, but they in no way represent the working class; instead they represent the bourgeoisie. All is not pure within the party. We must see this point, otherwise we shall suffer.’<sup>6</sup> He was in retreat, unable to press the point any further.

A year earlier, as the leadership desperately tried to find an escape route from the famine that was claiming millions of lives, several provincial leaders had favoured returning small plots of communal land to the farmers. Anhui had been one of the first provinces to sink into famine, but was also one of the first to emerge from it as Zeng Xisheng began to allow farmers to rent the land. Tao Zhu, a powerful Politburo member, supported the move. ‘This way people won’t starve to death,’ he said, adding that ‘if this is capitalism, then I prefer capitalism. Do we really want everyone to be poor under socialism?’<sup>7</sup> But others, like Zhou Enlai, kept their counsel, having attracted the wrath of the Chairman in the past for trying to slow down the pace of collectivisation.

After the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and a small group of advisers continued to discuss ways of recalibrating the economy. Mao was away from the capital, touring the south and observing his colleagues from afar. Much of what had been left unsaid at the party gathering in January 1962 was now voiced more openly, sometimes in harsh terms. ‘Lack of modesty and lack of experience are the main reasons why we made such a big mess of it,’ Liu allegedly said. ‘We should place the market on top of everything else.’ He and others proposed delegating responsibility for working the fields directly to the farming households rather than the collective. It was private farming in all but name.<sup>8</sup> A few months later, in May, Liu pressed for the right of some villagers to leave the collectives altogether: ‘if we don’t allow 20 per cent of the peasants to go it alone, I don’t think we can keep the collective economy’.<sup>9</sup>

But the defining moment probably came one hot afternoon in July, when Mao was resting by the side of his swimming pool in Beijing in a bad mood. Liu Shaoqi had asked him to return to the capital for important business. The Chairman demanded an explanation. Liu opened by reporting that Chen Yun and Tian Jiaying, two of the most outspoken critics of the Great Leap Forward, wished to present their views on returning the land to the farmers. Mao became angry. Hastily, Liu said: ‘So many people have died of hunger!’ Then he blurted out, ‘History will judge you and me, even cannibalism will go into the books!’ Mao now fell into a rage. ‘The Three Red Banners [meaning the main components of the Great Leap Forward, including the people’s communes] have been shot down, now the land is being divided up again,’ he shouted. ‘What have you done to resist this? What’s going to happen after I’m dead?’ The two men soon calmed down, but the episode must have left Mao wondering whether Liu Shaoqi was his nemesis, the Chinese Khrushchev who would denounce him after his death and launch a campaign of deMaoification.<sup>10</sup>

More irritation followed on 1 August, as a revised version of Liu Shaoqi’s 1939 essay *How to be a Good Communist* was published after having been serialised in the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the party.<sup>11</sup> Liu had been chairman of the state since 1959, and Mao’s heir apparent was clearly trying to build an image for himself as an independent and creative thinker.

Five days later the Chairman decided that it was time to counter-attack. He delivered a major speech on class struggle at the leadership’s annual retreat by the beach resort of Beidaihe. ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’ became the slogan of the day a month later, as the powerful Central Committee elected in 1956 convened in the capital. Mao’s first target was the breaking up of collective land. He homed in on Deng Zihui, one of Liu Shaoqi’s underlings. Years earlier, the Chairman had already harshly condemned Deng for ‘tottering along like a woman with bound feet’ on the road to collectivisation. Deng was the most vocal advocate of contracting production out to individual households. Mao condemned the practice as ‘capitalist’ and Deng as a ‘rightist’. He also rounded on several provincial leaders who had defended the system. Zeng Xisheng, the leader of Anhui province who had pioneered a return of the land to the farmers, was now attacked as a ‘capitalist roader’.

For good measure, Peng Dehuai, already purged at the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959, was condemned once again. After the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, Deng Xiaoping had begun rehabilitating cadres who had fallen victim to the purges carried out in the wake of the Lushan plenum. Even Peng had submitted an appeal for his political rehabilitation, but instead Mao escalated the charges, accusing him of having colluded with reactionary forces the world over.<sup>12</sup>

Mao was back in charge, for all to see. A few leaders waited to see which way the wind would blow. Most of them, sensing a change of direction,



rallied behind him. Liu Shaoqi, silent at first, acquiesced.<sup>13</sup> Once again, it had become dangerous to disagree with the Chairman. The days of the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference were over.

By the time the plenum reached its conclusion a few weeks later, Mao enjoyed the full backing of his colleagues. He announced that ‘We must acknowledge that classes will continue to exist for a long time. We must also acknowledge the existence of a struggle of class against class and admit the possibility of the restoration of reactionary classes. We must raise our vigilance and properly educate our youth as well as the cadres, the masses and the middle- and basic-level cadres. Otherwise a country like ours can still move towards its opposite.’<sup>14</sup>

To raise revolutionary vigilance and educate the masses on the benefits of socialism, a Socialist Education Campaign was launched a few months later, with the motto ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’. Among its instruments were committees of poor and middle peasants. In the Xingtai region of Hebei, many thousands were established and then unleashed on ‘capitalists’ and ‘go-it-aloners’. They clamoured for the return of all holdings larger than the small private plots allowed since 1960. In Anhui province, the countryside was recollectivised within half a year, as countless production teams were forced to surrender their land to the people’s communes. Villagers who worked on their own on the margins of the communes were accused of undermining the collective economy. In Guizhou, where Zhou Lin had followed a path similar to that adopted by Zeng Xisheng, land was also claimed back from individual households.<sup>15</sup>

Any type of activity that took place outside the collectives was viewed with suspicion, even raising chickens or weaving baskets in the evening to earn some extra income. Speculators seemed to be everywhere. In Xi’an over 2,000 merchants were going it alone, some of them starting to charge higher interest than their counterparts in the state sector. Shenyang, all the way up in Manchuria, had an astounding 20,000 private entrepreneurs, while in Wuhan, the commercial and industrial centre on the middle Yangtze, 3,000 profiteers made a living by exploiting loopholes in the planned economy, colluding with cadres to buy rationed commodities at state-controlled prices and selling them back for a profit on the black market. Many carried out their trade across several provinces. Private networks were constructed far and wide, involving not only agricultural products but also gold and silver. From Guangdong in the subtropical south, some communes sent their own agents with rare produce around the country by plane. A shadow economy flourished in the interstices of the collectives. There were underground factories, underground construction teams, underground transportation corps.<sup>16</sup> Even opium, the very symbol of imperialist oppression, was being resurrected, its silky flowers, held high on elegant stems, turning entire fields white, pink, red and purple, from Heilongjiang to Shanxi. In Zunyi, a town in Guizhou where the communists had stopped during the Long March in 1935 to elect Mao Zedong as their leader, dozens of opium dens operated with impunity.<sup>17</sup>

To the leadership, it appeared that a whole new bourgeois class was emerging from the ruins of Mao’s Great Famine. Much of this underground activity had indeed sprung to life since the dead hand of the state had been relaxed in the last year or so. But in an odd twist of fate, the attempt to replace individual rewards with moral incentives during the Great Leap Forward had already produced a nation of entrepreneurs. People had not simply waited to starve to death. In a society in disintegration, they had resorted to every means available to survive. So destructive was radical collectivisation that at every level the population tried to circumvent, undermine or exploit the master plan, covertly giving full scope to the profit motive that the party was trying to eliminate. As the catastrophe unfolded, claiming tens of millions of victims, the very survival of an ordinary person came to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state.

Theft became routine. One survivor of the famine summed it up: ‘Those who could not steal died. Those who managed to steal some food did not die.’<sup>18</sup> Sometimes entire villages banded together, hiding the grain and keeping two sets of books, one with the real figures and another with fake numbers for the grain inspectors. People learned to trade. One of the many paradoxes of the Great Leap Forward was that everything was for sale, as bricks, clothes and fuel were bartered for food. Millions also left the countryside to work in underground factories, despite formal restrictions on the freedom of movement. They sent remittances back home to keep their families alive.

Higher up the social hierarchy, local cadres showed extraordinary entrepreneurial guile in devising novel ways to defraud the state. State enterprises sent purchasing agents to bypass the rigid supply system. In Nanjing alone, hundreds of units had been involved in the direct trading of scarce commodities between themselves, outside the state plan. Some counterfeited shipping permits, used false names, forged certificates and even shipped in the name of the army in order to secure a profit.<sup>19</sup>

Everywhere – or so it seemed, as the campaign unfolded, going through many political twists and turns – there existed government organs, state enterprises and people’s communes where cadres took the lead in undermining the socialist economy. They became the focus of the Socialist Education Campaign. Teams were organised to scrutinise the records of party members, in rural areas in particular. In the people’s communes, they scrutinised corruption in accounting, food distribution, the division of the land and ways in which work points, given to commune members instead of a salary, were distributed.

Liu Shaoqi threw his full weight behind the campaign. In February 1963, he had interrupted a report by Peng Zhen on corruption in the cities to warn gravely that the Socialist Education Campaign was ‘a very acute class struggle’, one that would determine ‘the life or death of our party’.<sup>20</sup> Trying to prove that he was a determined revolutionary and worthy heir to the Chairman, Liu was veering even further to the left than Mao himself. By the end of 1963, he had sent his own wife to the countryside to head a work team. Wang Guangmei departed from Beijing with much fanfare. In Funing county, just outside the beach resort of Beidaihe, she set up her headquarters in a small village called Peach Garden, determined to ‘take power back from class enemies’. She showed herself to be a fierce class warrior, inciting ever greater punitive violence against alleged enemies of the party. Suspects were beaten, forced to stand naked in the cold and threatened with execution. It was rumoured that she introduced a new torture method, known as the jet plane, as victims were made to stand for hours with bent knees and arms pulled straight back to increase the strain. The jet plane would become very popular with Red Guards a few years later. The conclusion of her inquiry was that all the cadres, ‘big or small’, had problems, and that none could be trusted.<sup>21</sup>

Across the country work teams exposed corruption on a staggering scale. In Hunan province, up to 80 per cent of all cadres in the countryside were found to be corrupt, working hand in hand with people from bad class backgrounds – those who had been condemned in earlier campaigns as landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries and bad elements. The slogan of the day was ‘class struggle is a struggle to the death’. The work teams carried out violent purges, as corrupt cadres and bad elements were denounced in public rallies, paraded through the streets and forced to confess to their wrongdoings. In every people’s commune, several victims were beaten to death.<sup>22</sup>

The enemy was ubiquitous, bribing local cadres to be reclassified as poor or middle peasants rather than the landlords and counter-revolutionaries they really were. Entire counter-revolutionary organisations had managed to infiltrate the ranks of the party. In Daoxian, a county of great natural beauty, with orange groves and hot springs, one in ten cadres had gone the capitalist way: ‘many people have no understanding of the meaning of class or class struggle, and no class awareness of the distinction between those who exploit and those who are exploited’. The whole region, it seemed, was still mired in feudal relations, as clan and lineage held sway over a superstitious population.<sup>23</sup>

So rotten were parts of the country that power was no longer in the hands of the communist party. This became particularly clear in the case of Baiyin,



an arid county located on a loess plateau in Gansu province. In March 1962, in the wake of the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, the local party committee had not only criticised Zhang Zhongliang, the provincial boss who had caused millions to die during the famine, but also pointed the finger at Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai and the Chairman himself. 'If Chairman Mao is not examined and corrected, he will commit the same errors as the later Stalin.' Somebody denounced the party committee as a revisionist clique. Beijing dispatched a team 1,500 strong in March 1963. They scrutinised the Baiyin Silver and Non-Ferrous Metals Company and interrogated, denounced in public meetings and tortured around 2,000 of its employees. Hundreds were accused of one crime or another, from 'speculation' to 'moral decadence'. Fourteen committed suicide. 'Power', it was announced, 'had been seized by counter-revolutionaries.' Mao liked the report, and the investigation was broadened to include the entire municipality. From the mayor and the party secretary to the head of the police, hardly anyone in a position of authority came out clean.<sup>24</sup>

Baiyin was proof that entire counties could fall into the hands of the enemy. On 8 July 1964, even Liu Shaoqi wondered: 'We should think it over, could revisionism appear in China in the future? If we don't pay attention it could.'

Mao retorted: 'It has already appeared!' He invoked the example of Baiyin. 'The way I look at it, a third of the power in this country is no longer in our hands, it is in the hands of our enemies.'

Liu Shaoqi agreed: 'Right now, problems appear at the lower level because we don't go after the top; it's precisely at the top that problems appear. In Funing county the peasants say that it's easy to be an official if you have friends at court [to protect you when you are in trouble].'

'What shall we do if a Khrushchev appears in China?' Mao reflected. 'If a revisionist centre appears, we will have to stop it.'<sup>25</sup>

Khrushchev, by now, had become a byword for revisionism. After the Soviet leader had visited Camp David in November 1959 and agreed to a reduction of 1 million Soviet troops, seeking a rapprochement with the United States, Beijing had begun to challenge Moscow openly for the leadership of the socialist camp, denouncing Khrushchev in increasingly vituperative terms for pursuing 'appeasement with imperialists'.<sup>26</sup> In July 1960 an angry Khrushchev retaliated by ordering thousands of Soviet advisers and their dependants to pack up and leave China. Economic relations between the two countries collapsed, scores of large-scale projects were cancelled and transfers of high-end military technology were frozen. After the world had come to the brink of atomic war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States tried to restrict the production of nuclear weapons by other nations. Mao, who years earlier had been promised help by Khrushchev developing an atomic bomb, viewed this as an attempt to isolate China. From September 1963 to July 1964, Beijing published a series of commentaries in the *People's Daily* portraying the Soviet Union as a country on the road towards capitalism and Khrushchev as the staunchest enemy of revolution.<sup>27</sup> Mao was making his claim for leadership in the communist world, causing ripples across communist parties from Albania to Cuba. But he also used the conflict to undermine his real and imagined enemies inside China.

In the summer of 1964, Liu Shaoqi formally assumed command of the Socialist Education Campaign. He was now determined to show his mettle. He toured the country, explaining to provincial leaders how the international fight against revisionist forces had to be linked to the suppression of revisionism at home. He even wondered whether Mao had been too conservative in venturing that a third of all power was in the hands of the enemy: 'It may well be more than a third.' Jiang Weiqing, the leader of Jiangsu province, dared to express doubts about the extent of the counter-revolution, but Liu forced him to make an abject self-criticism. Wang Renzhong, the sycophantic follower of Mao who had volunteered a confession at the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference, now shifted his loyalty and proclaimed that he, too, deserved to be thoroughly criticised by Liu Shaoqi.<sup>28</sup> By asserting his personal authority over the party elders, Liu was stealing Mao's thunder.

On 1 August 1964, Liu reported back to a packed meeting in Beijing, with the top brass in attendance. The audience was eerily quiet as Zhou Enlai led the chairman of the state to the podium. Instead of speaking from the lectern, Liu paced the podium, his hands clasped behind his back. He asked that everyone emulate his wife, and take part in the campaign by joining work teams in the countryside: 'Hurry and go!' Those who declined, he insinuated, were not fit to serve on the Politburo. The whole performance took less than an hour. On their way out, many leading officials wondered what had just happened. 'What the hell was that? Were we being lectured?', some of them muttered. Several army officials cursed Liu under their breath. They did not like taking orders from anyone but the Chairman, and they certainly did not appreciate how Liu publicly promoted his own wife.<sup>29</sup>

By now, the campaign was escalating beyond isolated towns and counties. Whole provinces were being accused of taking the capitalist road. One such was Guizhou province, where the entire leadership was denounced as 'rightist', with the capital, Guiyang, branded a 'nest of counter-revolutionaries', a 'small Taiwan' teeming with agents of imperialism. The work team in charge of Guizhou hunted them down, investigating the dossiers and background histories of all party members, searching their households for incriminating evidence, encouraging people to denounce each other, dragging prominent victims in front of assembled crowds for public trials. Zhou Lin, party secretary of Guizhou, was purged, his underlings hounded across the province. The head of the work team, a close associate of Liu Shaoqi, took over the province in September 1964. Over the following two months, up to a quarter of party members in some counties vanished from public view. Some were issued a formal warning, others put under arrest or sent away to the gulag.<sup>30</sup>

Guizhou was an extreme example, but the situation elsewhere was not all that different. Exact figures are hard to come by, but one historian has estimated that during the Socialist Education Campaign conducted by Liu Shaoqi, over 5 million party members were punished, with more than 77,000 people hounded to their death. The vast majority were innocent, and many of these verdicts were overturned in the 1980s. Liu pushed through one of the longest and most vicious purges of party members in the history of the People's Republic.<sup>31</sup>

As whole provinces were being toppled by Liu Shaoqi, a dramatic turn of events took place in Moscow in October 1964. In a surgical, bloodless coup, led by one of his own protégés, Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's colleagues deposed him, ending his ten-year reign. A delegation headed by Zhou Enlai was sent to Moscow. Hopes for a better relationship were quickly dashed. At a Kremlin reception on 7 November, the highly inebriated Soviet defence minister staggered towards Marshal He Long and said in the hearing of everyone present: 'We've already got rid of Khrushchev; you ought to follow our example and get rid of Mao Zedong. That way we'll get on better.'<sup>32</sup>

At Beijing airport one week later, in a show of defiance against the Soviet Union, a grim Chairman flanked by his colleagues welcomed the delegation back. The *People's Daily* denounced Moscow for practising 'Khrushchevism without Khrushchev'. Mao could not help but wonder whether his colleagues might contemplate Maoism without Mao.

The Chairman now started distancing himself from his heir apparent. He was deeply suspicious of Liu's increasing assertion of authority over the party. By the end of November, Mao goaded his ambitious next in line. 'Let's change over now. You be Chairman; you be the Qin Emperor [the ruthless emperor to whom Mao was often compared]. I have my weak points. When I tell people off it has no effect. You're vigorous. You should take over the role of telling people off.'<sup>33</sup> A few weeks later, he began mentioning 'leaders taking the capitalist road', hinting darkly at a bureaucratic class that was drinking the blood of the workers. Then, on 26 December, to celebrate his seventy-first birthday, Mao summoned a group of party leaders to the Great Hall of the People for a banquet, where he harped on revisionism and attacked 'independent kingdoms' at the centre. The atmosphere was glacial.<sup>34</sup>

The following day, Mao referred enigmatically to the existence of two factions within the party, a socialist one and a capitalist one. 'In Beijing, and I

don't mean the Beijing party committee, there are two independent kingdoms. I will let you guess, I have said enough.'<sup>35</sup> On 28 December, as Deng Xiaoping suggested that the Chairman need not attend a meeting on the Socialist Education Campaign, Mao brandished copies of the party and state constitutions, reading out a passage asserting his right to speak as a citizen and party member. 'One person told me not to attend the meeting [alluding to Deng Xiaoping], and another didn't want me to speak [meaning Liu Shaoqi].' Outside the meeting room, Mao complained: 'Somebody is shitting on my head.'<sup>36</sup>

Over the following weeks, Mao continued carping over how the Socialist Education Campaign was being implemented, constantly interfering with the work of his colleagues. In January 1965, he put his foot down, demanding the retraction of accusations against Zhou Lin, the head of Guizhou. What rattled the Chairman was that Liu Shaoqi was placing his own men in positions of power in Guizhou, including several who had been trained in Moscow and had worked as secret agents in the pre-1949 communist underground. Like Stalin in the Great Terror, Liu sought to use the public security and party organs to push through his purge.<sup>37</sup>

But, most of all, the Socialist Education Campaign focused on the rank and file in the countryside. If revisionism was to be prevented from taking over the country, power holders ensconced in high office should come under fire. Liu had sent his own wife to investigate the grassroots, demanding that others follow her lead by joining large work teams across the country. Mao did not appreciate this top-down approach, preferring a bottom-up campaign in which ordinary people would shine the spotlight on the very leaders who were heading those work teams. In January 1965, he had the guidelines for the campaign rewritten. One key point was 'to rectify those people in positions of authority within the party who take the capitalist road'.<sup>38</sup> Red Guards would turn to this passage just over a year later during the Cultural Revolution, which would subsume the Socialist Education Campaign.





## War on the Cultural Front

At the Congress of Victors, Stalin had declared that fierce battles lay ahead. As the *Short Course* explained:

He warned the party that although its enemies, the opportunists and nationalist deviators of all shades and complexions, had been defeated, remnants of their ideology still lingered in the minds of some party members and often asserted themselves. The survivals of capitalism in economic life and particularly in the minds of men provided a favourable soil for the revival of the ideology of the defeated anti-Leninist groups. The development of people's mentality does not keep pace with their economic position. As a consequence, survivals of bourgeois ideas still remained in men's minds and would continue to do so even though capitalism had been abolished in economic life.<sup>1</sup>

Stalin believed that socialism demanded nothing less than a complete rupture with the attitudes and ideas of the past. In the years following the Congress of Victors, war was declared on traditional culture. Private printing houses were closed down. Religion was stamped out, and intellectuals 'battered into submission or else discarded'. Those who joined the war on the cultural front were called 'engineers of human souls'. Stalin became the arbiter of high culture, lauding a few novelists as great proletarian intellectuals, sending countless others to their deaths. Stalin wanted culture for the masses.<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1942, Mao had brushed aside the idea that art could exist simply for art's sake. After tens of thousands of students, teachers, artists, writers and journalists had poured into Yan'an, a remote and isolated mountain area in Shaanxi where the communist party had established its headquarters, the Chairman launched a campaign to eradicate any lingering influence of free thinking among the young volunteers. They were interrogated in front of crowds, made to confess in indoctrination meetings and forced to denounce each other in a bid to save themselves. Some were incarcerated in caves, others put through mock executions. Mao demanded absolute loyalty from intellectuals. 'All literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared towards definite political lines,' he declared.

After 1949, the party spared no effort to crush independent thought. Private newspapers were closed within months of liberation, while thousands of titles were withdrawn from circulation. Entire libraries were burned. The beat of drums and the chant of revolutionary song displaced classical music, decried as bourgeois. Jazz was banned. New plays celebrating class struggle were brought to the villagers by travelling drama troupes. Most foreign films were deemed reactionary and replaced by Russian ones, for instance *Lenin in October*, one of Stalin's favourites. Religion, too, came under attack, as monasteries, temples, churches and mosques were converted into barracks or prisons. Religious leaders were persecuted, their congregations forced to renounce their faith at public meetings – after much pressure, not to mention outright threats to themselves and their families. Sacred objects were melted down for their metal.<sup>3</sup>

Millions of teachers, scientists and writers – termed 'intellectuals' in communist jargon – found themselves forced to prove their allegiance to the new regime. Like everyone else, they attended indoctrination classes to learn Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, studying official pamphlets, newspapers and textbooks. The party line was periodically enforced through a witch-hunt, as thousands were denounced for 'bourgeois idealism' and packed off to labour camps. This happened in 1955, when under cover of an attack on Hu Feng – a famous writer who had compared the stultifying literary theories of the party to knives thrust into the brains of writers – over a million individuals, from primary school teachers up to leading party theoreticians, were forced to defend themselves against accusations of treason. Many committed suicide; even more ended up in an ever expanding gulag. Two years later, a further 500,000 were labelled 'rightists' by Deng Xiaoping, as the Hundred Flowers campaign reached its tragic conclusion.

Although Mao disparaged intellectuals, like Stalin he tried to keep a few of them as occasional companions. Like Stalin, he would break them at the merest hint of disagreement. One example is Liang Shuming, a remarkable thinker hired in 1918 at the age of twenty-four by the philosophy department in Peking University, when Mao was still an obscure school teacher. On a brief visit to Yan'an in 1938, Liang presented the Chairman with copies of his work. Mao was flattered, and after 1949 cultivated the professor, on occasion sending his own car to ferry him to Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the party. The relationship cooled after Liang wrote a letter in 1952 to defend private entrepreneurs. A year later, at a meeting of the Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body designed to create the appearance of democracy, Liang insisted that, in the wake of land reform, villagers lived 'in the ninth ring of hell'. The delegates shouted him down and a stern Mao remonstrated with him, publishing a lengthy 'Criticism of Liang Shuming's Reactionary Ideas', in which he came down hard on the philosopher: 'There are two ways of killing people: one is to kill with the gun and the other with the pen. The way which is most artfully disguised and draws no blood is to kill with the pen. That is the kind of murderer you are.' Liang was neither the first nor the last intellectual whom Mao courted and then discarded as unworthy of his trust.<sup>4</sup>

At the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in January 1962, when Mao was forced to be on his best behaviour, he had magnanimously accepted at least partial responsibility for the Great Leap Forward, drawing on historical examples of emperors who had strayed by failing to listen to their advisers. He told the story of Xiang Yu, an emperor who 'hated listening to opinions which differed from his', and was ultimately defeated by his rival Liu Bang, an 'open-minded man who took advice and was as relaxed as a flowing river'.<sup>5</sup>

But eight months later, as Mao spearheaded the Socialist Education Campaign, he quashed an appeal for rehabilitation from his greatest critic at the 1959 Lushan plenum, Marshal Peng Dehuai. Almost simultaneously, Kang Sheng, head of the party's Ideology Steering Committee, concocted the idea of a high-level plot against the party. A tall, slightly bowed man with a sparse moustache and a sinister look, Kang had been trained in Moscow by Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the secret police. During the great purges Stalin launched in 1934, he worked closely with the Soviet secret police in eliminating hundreds of Chinese students in the Soviet Union. A few years later Stalin sent him to Yan'an on a special plane. He quickly sided with Mao, using the expertise he had acquired in the Soviet Union to oversee security and intelligence. He was the hand behind the persecution of intellectuals in Yan'an, and so brutal were his methods that in 1945 he was forced to step down. He adopted a low profile throughout the 1950s, suffering from bouts of psychosis and epilepsy, and was further demoted at the Eighth Party Congress in 1956 at which Mao Zedong Thought was written out of the constitution.<sup>6</sup>

But Mao protected this master of intrigue, and was now using him to regain control over the party. Kang alleged that a historical novel about a fallen party leader named Liu Zhidan was in fact an attempt to exonerate Peng Dehuai. Kang slipped a note to Mao: 'Using novels to carry out anti-party activities is a great invention.' Mao read out the note, which Kang interpreted as licence to accuse several leaders of being part of a plot. Its mastermind, he contended, was Xi Zhongxun, a party elder who sometimes acted as premier in the absence of Zhou Enlai and had sided with Peng

Dehuai at the Lushan plenum. Under Mao's watchful eye, Xi was purged.<sup>7</sup>

Mao now talked about the importance of class struggle in the realm of ideology. 'Writing novels is popular these days, isn't it? The use of novels for anti-party activity is a great invention. Anyone wanting to overthrow a political regime must create public opinion and do some preparatory ideological work. This applies to counter-revolutionary as well as to revolutionary classes.'<sup>8</sup>

The sheer scale of the ideological rot was highlighted during the Socialist Education Campaign. In June 1963, the leadership warned that 'right now there is a serious, acute class struggle taking place inside the country relating to ideology, education, theory, science, arts, newspapers, periodicals, broadcasting, publishing, health, physical education and other fields, and all of these merit close attention.' In Xi Zhongxun's home province, plays inspired by the West were performed in the cities, while feudal opera was enjoying a revival in the countryside. In some of the villages scattered along the fertile valley of the Wei River, often seen as the cradle of civilisation, tutors in private schools were returning to the classics of Confucianism. In the ancient city of Xi'an, which had once housed hundreds of Buddhist shrines, pagodas and monasteries inside its walls, counter-revolutionary organisations spewed their venom in publications openly on sale at bookstalls clustered around the main thoroughfares. Some followed Hu Feng, others praised Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Nationalist Party that had been defeated by the communists and forced to flee to Taiwan in 1949. Several government units even ordered reading material from abroad. The Xi'an Foreign Language Institute, which had churned out Russian graduates in the 1950s, subscribed to scores of foreign magazines and newspapers. In Hanzhong University, the first lesson in English was 'The United States' Today is Our Tomorrow', an ironic inversion of the official slogan that had spread after 1949, namely 'The Soviet Union's Today is Our Tomorrow'.<sup>9</sup>

Xi'an was not unique. In Wuhan, the commercial powerhouse on the shores of the Yangtze, hundreds of unlicensed peddlars had since 1961 been doing thriving business lending and selling books. Many of these publications were reactionary, for instance the *Guidelines for Members of the Nationalist Party*. Copies of popular folk ballads were also on sale, and not just a few dozen rescued from the recycling plant. The contents of the majority of some 15,000 libretti were condemned as 'feudal, superstitious, Confucian, preposterous and pornographic'. At the railway station and on the wharfs, travellers could purchase photos of 'politically incorrect leaders', not to mention foreign actresses. The rot reached far beyond Hubei's busy port, as feudal literature was common in the countryside. In Gong'an county hundreds of primary schools relied on the Three Character Classic, a simple text used before liberation to teach children Confucian values.<sup>10</sup>

A cloud of superstition seemed to hang over the countryside. In the Xingtai region of Hebei, where poor peasants were being unleashed on 'capitalists' and 'go-it-aloners' in the Socialist Education Campaign, cadres had colluded with reactionary elements to build temples, stage plays, burn incense and invoke the spirits. In Jiangxi province too, class struggle against farmers who cultivated their own plots proceeded apace, but failed to tackle the much deeper-rooted phenomenon of religious revival. In the Qujiang region, more than a hundred Buddhist temples had been rebuilt. Idols appeared across the country. And much more sinister habits were making a comeback, as parts of the countryside seemed to be slipping back into a feudal past from which communism was supposed to have rescued the villagers. Hundreds of women were sold into wedlock. Xu Rongda spent 2,200 yuan to purchase his bride. The party secretary of his commune, for his part, bought a fifteen-year-old girl. Across the country, villagers returned to their old habits, disenchanted with communism: 'Year in, year out there is a catastrophe, day in, day out the talk is about difficulties, when will it be over?' In Shunde, not far from Hong Kong, the outlook was bleak: 'Did we really walk down the right road to socialism?'<sup>11</sup>

Even Christianity seemed impervious to fifteen years of harsh persecution. Over Easter, hundreds of Christians celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ in Yidu, Shandong province, while the church in Changwei claimed thousands of followers, most of them converted in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. In Qingdao, the port of Shandong, churches were packed over Christmas.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the converts were children and adolescents, as the young appeared to be particularly vulnerable to counter-revolutionary poison. In Qingdao, a third of all children took part in religious activities. Reactionary songs were common. Many mocked the party by twisting the lyrics of well-known propaganda songs. 'Without the Communist Party, There Would be No New China', an obligatory song belted out in schools, factories and offices, became 'Without the Communist Party, There Would be No Dried Yam', as the sweet potato, cut and dried in the sunshine, stood as a symbol for famine. Another subversive take was 'The Sky Above the Liberated Areas is Bright and the People are Happy', which perhaps predictably became 'The Sky in the Liberated Areas is Dark and the People are Unhappy'. More than a hundred similar songs existed.<sup>13</sup>

In Beijing, right under the noses of the party elders, some students took their defiance much further, proudly calling themselves 'Tito' or 'Khrushchev'. A few spoke openly of the overthrow of the communist party. Wang Cuiwen, aged twenty-seven, was a graduate student in biology at Peking University who talked ceaselessly about the famine and referred to the party as the worst of all possible dictatorships. He and his friends had tried to flee to Hong Kong in the spring of 1962. He failed, but many others succeeded. In May, the exodus reached 5,000 a day.<sup>14</sup>

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The Socialist Education Campaign was meant to teach people to appreciate the benefits of socialism. It was also used to stamp out corruption in the party ranks and ferret out counter-revolutionary plots, real or imagined. As we have seen, more than 5 million party members were punished in one way or another. But repression alone would not suffice to counteract the pervasive effects of a counter-revolutionary ideology that had taken hold in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. The Chairman was particularly concerned with educating the young, who were the heirs to the revolution. Lei Feng was part of the answer.

On 5 March 1963, Mao exhorted the nation to learn from Lei Feng, a young soldier who had dedicated his life to serving the people. Lei Feng had died the previous year at the age of twenty-one, struck by a falling telephone pole. His posthumous diary, a record of his ideological progress, was published and studied across the country. There had been other models for emulation in the past, but most had been war heroes and heroines who had died before 1949 fighting the Japanese or the nationalists. Lei Feng was different: he had joined the army after liberation, and he was designed to appeal to a generation of young readers raised in an era of peace. Lei Feng turned Mao into an everyman's philosopher, as his diary showed how the Chairman's political aphorisms could be used to solve everyday problems. Lei Feng was an invention of the propaganda department.

In his diary, Lei Feng explained how 'the blood given by the party and Chairman Mao has penetrated every single cell of my body'. Mao even appeared in a vision: 'Yesterday I had a dream. I dreamt of seeing Chairman Mao. Like a compassionate father, he stroked my head. With a smile, he spoke to me: "Do a good job in study; be forever loyal to the party, loyal to the people!" My joy was overwhelming; I tried to speak but could not.'<sup>15</sup>

Glowing testimonials from factory workers and farm labourers were published in letters to newspapers all over China. For the benefit of the younger generation, tens of thousands of meetings extolling Lei Feng as the ideal communist were held. Plays and movies were produced. Songs were composed, some of them running into dozens of verses. Storytellers roamed the villages to enthrall illiterate villagers with his exploits and his love of the Chairman. A Lei Feng exhibition opened at the Beijing Army Museum, where a huge screen at the entrance inscribed with Mao Zedong's calligraphy exhorted visitors to 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng!' On display under glass was Lei Feng's only uniform, his hat, bag and handkerchief. Slogans culled from his diary adorned the walls. Everywhere were huge, life-size photographs of Lei Feng, a chubby, eternally smiling young soldier among groups of smiling

workers, peasants and children. As one shrewd observer noted, Lei Feng was the poor man's Mao, a simplified Mao for the masses. Most of all, he was the young man's Mao, 'a rejuvenated Mao, speaking the language of enthusiastic adolescents'. He was meant to rouse people from the apathy caused by Mao's Great Famine and heighten their hatred for class enemies.<sup>16</sup>

Other heroes were promoted for emulation. Ouyang Hai appeared in 1963. He, too, had been an army hero who had left a diary revealing his devotion to the Chairman. Yet another incarnation of Lei Feng turned up in November 1965, this one called Wang Jie. Wang, who also kept a diary, had thrown himself on a land mine that had been accidentally triggered by local militia, saving twelve bystanders. In 1963 the slogan was 'Learn from Lei Feng', now it became 'Learn from Wang Jie'. Identical posters were produced, identical articles were published. Other young role models succeeded one another rapidly, including Mai Xiande, a sailor critically wounded in 1965; Wang Jinsi, a pioneer worker at the Daqing oilfields, nicknamed 'Man of Iron'; and Liu Yingjun, a soldier who died aged twenty-one by saving children from runaway horses. All of them were resurrected briefly from death to flit across the stage and help the younger generation feel closer to the Chairman. But only Mao was to be remembered eternally.<sup>17</sup>

Zhai Zhenhua, the daughter of dedicated communists, was twelve when she and her classmates were asked to emulate Lei Feng: 'All students had a copy of *Excerpts from Lei Feng's Diary* . . . The "Learn from Lei Feng" movement began when I was in grade five and lasted until the Cultural Revolution. People were encouraged to be like him: to obey orders, to work hard, to do good deeds, to be selfless, and to study the writings of Chairman Mao.'<sup>18</sup> Xu Xiaodi, aged ten, identified so closely with Lei Feng that she cried for him.<sup>19</sup> In Sichuan, Jung Chang left school with her classmates each afternoon to 'do good deeds like Lei Feng'. As the campaign started taking hold, some students became ready to submit themselves 'unquestioningly to the control of the Great Leader'.<sup>20</sup>

Helping old ladies at the railway station, as Lei Feng had done, was all well and good, but students were warned not to assist class enemies. The motto of the Socialist Education Campaign, after all, was 'Never Forget Class Struggle'. To instil class hatred in them, regular sessions of 'Recalling Bitterness' were organised, where elderly workers and peasants came to tell of the harsh and miserable days before liberation. 'We heard of childhoods dominated by starvation, freezing winters with no shoes, and premature, painful deaths. They told us how boundlessly grateful they were to Chairman Mao for saving their lives and giving them food and clothing.' Jung Chang came out of those sessions feeling devastated by the atrocities committed by the nationalist regime and passionately devoted to Mao.<sup>21</sup> In cities like Nanjing, some retired workers evoked their personal memories of torture and rape by evil capitalists to tens of thousands of people. The packed theatres were so shaken by sobs that the workers' accounts were barely audible.<sup>22</sup>

Students were also taken to 'museums of class education' where capitalist exploitation was on full display, showing how class enemies had wallowed in luxury while the masses lived in poverty. There were sculptures of starving peasants forced to pay exorbitant rents. There were torture chambers and dungeons with iron cages, all recreated to convey the dread of the feudal past. Now, the students were told, class enemies threatened to undermine the dictatorship of the proletariat and return the country to the old days of feudal exploitation, snatching their winter shoes, stealing their food, turning them into slaves.<sup>23</sup>

The army was behind Lei Feng, and the army was behind the drive to spread Mao Zedong Thought. At the Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959, Lin Biao had rallied to the defence of the Chairman, accusing Peng Dehuai in his frail, squeaky voice of being 'ambitious, conspiratorial and hypocritical'. Then he crowed that 'Only Mao is a great hero, a role to which no one else should dare to aspire. We are all very far behind him, so don't even go there!'<sup>24</sup> In private, Lin was in fact decidedly more critical than Peng, confiding in his private diary that the Great Leap Forward was 'based on fantasy and a total mess'.<sup>25</sup> But he knew that the best way to maintain power was to shower the Chairman with flattery. Lin had realised long before how crucial it was to promote Mao's cult of personality: 'He worships himself, he has blind faith in himself, adores himself, he will take credit for every achievement but blame others for his failures.'<sup>26</sup>

Immediately after taking over the Ministry of Defence from Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao begun promoting the study of Mao Zedong Thought as a shortcut to mastering Marxism-Leninism. Soldiers were asked to commit short passages from Mao's collected writings to memory. From April 1961, the *Liberation Army Daily* started carrying a quotation from the Chairman prominently displayed on the front page. Readers cut out the epigraphs and started compiling their own collections. Then, in January 1964, a mimeographed compendium of these quotations was published, with a fuller version distributed to the People's Liberation Army in May. It came covered in gaudy red plastic, and was no bigger than the palm of a hand, easily fitting inside the pocket of a standard military uniform. Lin Biao provided an inscription, taken from Lei Feng's diary: 'Read Chairman Mao's book, listen to Chairman Mao's words, act according to Chairman Mao's instructions and be a good fighter for Chairman Mao.' By the time a new edition appeared in August 1965, millions of copies of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao Zedong*, also known as the Little Red Book, were being distributed far beyond the ranks of the army.<sup>27</sup>

Mao basked in the adulation, and ordered the country to emulate Lin Biao and the People's Liberation Army. 'The merit of the Liberation Army', he said, 'is that its political ideology is correct.'<sup>28</sup> In response, the army started to assume a more prominent role in civil life, setting up political departments in government work units to promote Mao Zedong Thought. The army also fostered a more martial atmosphere, in tune with the Socialist Education Campaign. Military 'summer camps' for students and workers were organised in the countryside. In primary schools, children were taught how to use airguns by shooting at portraits of Chiang Kai-shek and American imperialists. At the Shanghai Children's Palace, originally built by Sun Yat-sen's wife with marble imported from Europe, special advisers organised military games for the Young Pioneers, easily identifiable by the red scarves they wore. Military training camps were set up for older students from reliable backgrounds, where they learned how to throw grenades and shoot with live bullets. In the summer of 1965, more than 10,000 university and 50,000 middle-school students in Shanghai spent a week in camp. Athletic clubs for 'national defence' were also founded by the army, offering classes in primary and secondary schools. 'The most important instruction was in shooting and communications.' There were rifle clubs, radio clubs, navigation clubs, electrical engineering clubs, flag signal clubs and parachuting clubs. Young people of dubious class background were excluded.<sup>29</sup>

On 1 October 1964, to celebrate National Day, the army organised a monumental show on Tiananmen with several choirs and ballet dancers in military uniform. A colossal figure of Chairman Mao opened the procession, which edged forward to the tune of 'Chairman Mao, the Sun in our Hearts'. Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing, proclaimed that the Chinese people, 'armed with Mao Zedong Thought', could overcome 'capitalist and feudal attempts at restoration as well as attacks by our enemies at home and abroad'.<sup>30</sup>

A passion for the military model went hand in hand with contempt for formal learning. 'Politics in Command' was Lin Biao's slogan. Mao had always been scathing of intellectuals, but he now began to express doubts about the entire education system. On 13 February 1963, on the occasion of the Spring Festival, when the country welcomed the Chinese New Year, he compared tests in high schools and universities to the old eight-legged essay, a written form of argumentation that candidates for the imperial examinations had been required to master under the Qing dynasty. 'I do not approve of this. It should be changed completely. I am in favour of publishing the questions in advance and letting the students study them and answer them with the aid of books.' He struck an even more rebellious note when he suggested that there were benefits to cheating. 'If your answer is good and I copy it, then mine too should be counted as good.' He praised students who dozed off when teachers rambled on with their tedious lectures. 'You don't have to listen to



nonsense, you can rest your brain instead.’<sup>31</sup>

Mao went further, accusing the education system of favouring students from bad class backgrounds – capitalists, landlords – as they were better equipped to succeed in education than the proletariat and the peasants. Worst of all, schools were run by bourgeois intellectuals who were failing in their mission of training ‘revolutionary successors’.<sup>32</sup>

Some students were quick to pick up the message. Hua Linshan, still a young boy in Guilin, a scenic town in Guangxi where karst hills rise sharply from the green plains, embraced Mao’s Spring Festival report: ‘Each word was like a precious stone.’ Like many other students, he felt crushed by an oppressive system based on blind obedience to teachers, mindless theory and rote learning. Mao was taking their side. As another future Red Guard put it, ‘Classes are wasting my time and teachers are wasting my time.’<sup>33</sup> Many were awaiting the Chairman’s call.

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Mao also took aim at literature and the arts. In November 1963, he attacked the Ministry of Culture for failing to curb the spread of feudal, superstitious and revisionist ideas. He suggested that it should change its name to the ‘Ministry of Gifted Scholars and Beautiful Ladies’. An even more appropriate name was the ‘Ministry of Foreign Dead People’. A month later he complained again that ‘dead people are still in control’. He also accused the All-China Federation of Literature and Art of tottering on the edge of revisionism: ‘For the last fifteen years, they have not been carrying out the party’s policy.’<sup>34</sup>

Spurred on by the Chairman, a national campaign was launched in the summer of 1964, aimed initially at traditional opera, one of the most popular art forms in the countryside. Five thousand leading cadres and artists were invited to attend the Peking Opera Festival under the auspices of Zhou Enlai. Peng Zhen, mayor of Beijing, condemned revisionism in ringing tones and exhorted his audience to ask whether opera served socialism or capitalism. ‘Does it take the road of Marxism-Leninism or the road of revisionism?’ Mao was pleased, but the real star of the festival was his wife.

Jiang Qing had been an up-and-coming actress in Shanghai in her early years, but after Japan had attacked the city in 1937 she headed for Yan’an, joining tens of thousands of other volunteers eager to dedicate their lives to the revolution. She was an attractive young woman, with fair skin and large eyes. She was also ambitious, ready to use sex to win power. Soon she attracted the attention of the Chairman. Mao was twenty years older and estranged from his third wife. The affair caused a stir among his comrades-in-arms, who disapproved of their leader abandoning a wife of long standing to marry an actress from Shanghai. Rumours circulated about her past, and an investigation even produced a report suspecting her of being an agent for Chiang Kai-shek. Kang Sheng, in charge of security, stepped in and vouched that she was a party member in good standing. He encouraged her liaison with the Chairman. Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing were old friends from Shandong, and they used each other to cement their relationship with Mao. A divorce was pronounced, as the Chairman’s wife was shipped off to the Soviet Union for medical treatment. Mao married his fourth wife in 1938, but the new Madame Mao had to agree to refrain from political activities, leaving her seething with resentment for years to come.<sup>35</sup>

The initial passion soon faded. Mao had an enormous appetite for sex, and after liberation a string of young women were recruited to service his needs. ‘Women were served to order like food.’ As Mao’s infidelities became more blatant, Jiang Qing became increasingly ill and lonely, suffering from a string of real and imaginary diseases. She was heavily medicated, suspected plots around her and complained all day long about noise, wind and glaring light. Pink and brown colours hurt her eyes, and she insisted that everything in her residence be painted light green – including the furniture. She demanded constant attention, but quarrelled incessantly with those around her. She had huge political ambitions, craving an active political role, but had become a helpless appendage to Mao.<sup>36</sup>

In 1961, Mao became smitten by one of the stewardesses on the special train that he used to travel through China. Zhang Yufeng was eighteen, with strikingly beautiful looks and a sharp tongue. She would soon become his closest female companion. Whether Jiang Qing agreed not to interfere in her husband’s numerous affairs in return for a public role is not known, but Mao introduced his wife to the political stage the following year. On 29 September 1962, a few days after the party conference at which Mao had launched the slogan ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’, Jiang Qing made her first public appearance. The occasion was a visit by President Sukarno, and a photo in the *People’s Daily* showed Jiang Qing standing next to Hartini, the Indonesian president’s wife. Liu Shaoqi and his wife Wang Guangmei also posed for the camera. The photos aroused widespread attention, in China and abroad, as even *Time* magazine noted how ‘the Peking matrons plainly competed for attention’ with Hartini. Jiang Qing appeared in a neat Western-style suit, but was outclassed by Wang Guangmei, dressed in a gown of opulent velvet.<sup>37</sup>

The occasion signalled the entrance of Madame Mao into the party politics from which she had been banned more than twenty years earlier. Mao allowed Jiang Qing to try her hand at culture and the arts. As Mao’s doctor noticed, ‘the more involved in politics she became, the more her hypochondria and neurasthenia eased’.<sup>38</sup>

In 1963 Jiang Qing homed in on a historical play about a concubine executed by a cruel and jealous despot. The turning point in the play came after the concubine blurted out her admiration for a handsome young scholar within earshot of her ageing master, sealing her death sentence. The play was staged at Zhongnanhai, with all the top leaders in attendance, but Mao looked glum. At the end of the performance, he slowly clapped his hands three or four times and then walked away in silence. The play had cut too close to the bone, as the Chairman took it as a dig at his own philandering.<sup>39</sup>

Jiang Qing, now spurred into action, started investigating the extent of feudal and foreign plays staged by drama troupes across the country. Before long, as self-appointed overseer of culture, she started issuing instructions on the production of drama, music and film.<sup>40</sup>

But she was not acting on her own. Liu Shaoqi, who had rallied behind Mao’s battle cry of ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’, also threw his weight behind the war on culture. In January 1964, he condemned Tian Han, author of the play that had offended Mao, saying that his work was ‘aimed at the communist party’. He, too, wanted a cleansing fire to burn through the very foundations of culture. Just as Liu claimed that over a third of all power in the countryside was in the hands of the enemy, he suggested that over a third of all art and culture, from universities down to village schools, was revisionist and ought to be overthrown in a revolution.<sup>41</sup>

Peng Zhen, too, had never believed in freedom for intellectuals, and he headed a small Group of Five charged by the party with revolutionising culture. It was in his capacity as head of the Group of Five that Peng Zhen gave the key speech on the danger of revisionism at the Peking Opera Festival. Kang Sheng was another member of the group.

Jiang Qing sided with her former mentor, Kang Sheng, who two years earlier had presided over the purge of Xi Zhongxun. At the Peking Opera Festival, they took Tian Han to task. In a thick Shandong accent, before a radiant Madame Mao, Kang denounced his work as ‘poisonous weeds that are anti-party and anti-socialist’. The playwright, pale as a sheet, stared at his shoes. He was one of Jiang Qing’s many foes, having offended her during her acting days in Shanghai.<sup>42</sup>

In the second half of 1964, the purge was expanded far beyond theatre. War was waged across the entire spectrum of intellectual activity, from fine arts to history, economics and philosophy. Endless ‘tools of Peng Dehuai’ and ‘mini-Khrushchevs’ were uncovered. By the time the campaign came to a formal end in April 1965, even the head of the Ministry of Culture had fallen from grace.<sup>43</sup>

But Mao had not brought his wife into the political arena to attack a few playwrights. He needed somebody he could trust for a much more important mission, one that aimed far above the Ministry of Culture. In February 1965 he sent Jiang Qing on a secret assignment to Shanghai, as culture would become the stage from which the next revolution was launched.



Replying to [redacted]

Guess what.... no one else at this care home infected!!  
My uncles death certificate arrived today!!

Permitted to the Director and Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages

DEATH		Form No. 1001
1. Name and place of birth Name: [redacted] Place of birth: [redacted] Date of birth: [redacted]		
2. Date and place of death Date: [redacted] Place: [redacted]		
3. Cause of death I (a) Covid-19 - NOT TESTED!		
4. Signature of Registrar [redacted]		
5. Signature of Medical Officer [redacted]		
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# 'Presumed Covid-19'

SIR - My mother died last week in a care home at the age of 98. When my brother registered her death, as expected, the cause given was "frailty due to old age", but he was surprised to see that the doctor certifying the death had added "presumed Covid-19", an inclusion that also shocked the home's manager.

The day before our mother died, my brother was allowed to sit with her for an hour. His temperature was checked before he was admitted, but there was no form of isolation and none of the home's staff were wearing personal protective equipment.

If doctors are attributing all deaths in care homes to Covid-19, it makes a nonsense of any statistics and does great reputational damage to both individual care homes and to the care industry as a whole.

[redacted]  
Christchurch, Dorset

## Clique of Four

In January 1965, Edgar Snow was invited to share a meal with Mao Zedong in one of the spacious rooms of the Great Hall of the People. The two went back to 1936, when Snow, a young, idealistic reporter from Missouri, had been one of the first foreigners to reach Yan'an. Mao told him his story, and Snow accepted it eagerly. *Red Star over China*, published a year later, was the scoop of the century, introducing the Chairman to the rest of the world and swaying opinion in favour of the communists, portrayed as agrarian reformers who lived cheek by jowl with the peasants in a great, unfolding democracy.

Now the Chairman was using Snow to convey another message to the outside world, this time on Vietnam: no troops would cross the border as long as the United States did not attack China. The interview was never published in China but read avidly by those with access to it.<sup>1</sup>

A few months earlier, on 16 October 1964, a mushroom cloud had soared into the atmosphere above Lop Nor, a salt lake in Xinjiang, China's westernmost province. The explosion had been powerful enough to set off Geiger counters on rooftops in Japan, where radiation watching had become something of a national hobby since the bombing of Hiroshima. China had just exploded its first atom bomb, becoming the fifth member of an exclusive club, joining the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and France. The test came just two months after a congressional resolution gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the power to respond to communist aggression in Vietnam. Would an atomic China allow its armies to overrun South-east Asia in a major clash with the United States?

Korea had set a dire precedent. Thirteen years earlier, on 18 October 1950, more than 180,000 Chinese troops had crossed into Korea under cover of night. In what one historian has called 'the largest ambush in the era of modern warfare', they took the United Nations forces completely by surprise, forcing them to retreat.<sup>2</sup>

Mao used the Korean War to build up a first-class arms industry, all with Soviet help. Stalin, on the other hand, was keen to see more American troops destroyed in Korea, and probably not unhappy to have a potential rival locked into a costly conflict. The war dragged on for three years, as neither Mao nor Stalin was willing to bring it to an end. The human cost of the conflict was enormous. China sent some 3 million men to the front, of whom an estimated 400,000 died, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of Korean casualties. The United States suffered more than 30,000 deaths on the battlefield. Mao indicated that Vietnam would not be a repeat of Korea.

A month after Snow's visit, another guest was welcomed in Beijing. After the disaster of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, Khrushchev had worked hard to improve relations with the United States. He did not want to get involved in Vietnam. But Brezhnev was eager for a harder line. In February 1965, as the United States dramatically escalated its involvement in Vietnam, he sent his premier Kosygin to Hanoi, where a defence treaty was agreed that provided the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh with a flood of financial aid, military equipment and technical advisers. En route back to Moscow, Kosygin stopped in Beijing to press for a joint effort in the Vietnam War. Young Pioneers with flowers welcomed him at the airport. But Mao, in the presence of the entire leadership, lectured Kosygin for several hours and rejected his pleas for unity.<sup>3</sup>

Mao wished to focus on the revolution at home. But not all his colleagues agreed that internal class struggle should have priority over world revolution. As US troop numbers began to rise in South Vietnam, Luo Ruiqing, chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, compared the United States to Nazi Germany and warned of a new East Asian Munich. On 5 May 1965, he used the notion of 'active defence', reminiscent of the Korean War, to warn that escalation was leading towards a 'local war of the Korean type'. The communist party, he asserted, was prepared 'to send our men to fight together with the people of Vietnam when they need us'.<sup>4</sup>

Lin Biao, minister of defence, came to the rescue, providing the Chairman with a rationale by proposing the notion of a 'people's war'. In June he abolished formal saluting, epaulettes, hard-peak caps, medals, insignia of rank, tailored uniforms for officers and other privileges in the People's Liberation Army. From a general all the way down to a soldier, every fighter was now to wear a single red star on an identical cap. Several months later, on 3 September, Lin expounded a strategy that avoided confrontation with the United States on the one hand and collaboration with the Soviet Union on the other. His vision hinged on a single term, one that would run throughout the Cultural Revolution: self-reliance. Revolutionary forces around the world, from Asia to Africa, would rely on their own military forces to destroy American imperialism: 'In order to fight a revolution and to fight a people's war and be victorious, it is imperative to adhere to the policy of self-reliance, rely on the strength of the masses in one's own country and prepare to carry on the fight independently even when all material aid from outside is cut off'.<sup>5</sup>

Luo Ruiqing had picked the anniversary of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany to make his speech. Lin Biao published his statement on the twentieth anniversary of China's victory over Japan. The very same day that Lin's piece appeared in the *People's Daily*, Luo, flanked by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping at a political rally in the Great Hall of the People, repeated the key elements of his spring talk.<sup>6</sup>

The rivalry between Lin Biao and Luo Ruiqing dated back to the Lushan plenum in 1959, when both had been promoted to important military positions. Lin was formally Luo's superior, but his chief of staff often went straight to Mao instead. There were deeper disagreements. Russian help with military technology – from jet fuel and spare parts for aircraft to ballistic missiles – came to an abrupt end with the withdrawal of Soviet experts from China in the summer of 1960. Lin Biao's answer was to advocate the primacy of man over weapon. Luo was disdainful. Ideology was paramount for Lin, who distributed the Little Red Book to the army in 1964 and promoted the slogan 'Politics in Command'. Luo was appalled.

Ye Qun, the tight-lipped, middle-aged wife of Lin Biao, went to see Mao in November 1965. She accused the chief of staff of undermining her husband and plotting for control over the army. Mao was easily swayed, relying on Lin Biao far more than on Luo Ruiqing. Relentless pressure was applied for months on end, as Luo was investigated, questioned, harangued and finally subjected to struggle sessions by groups of up to ninety-five participants, included Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, his erstwhile supporters. Luo was a party stalwart and tough as nails. Before becoming chief of staff in 1959, he had built up the labour-camp system as minister of public security, presiding over the deaths of millions of ordinary people. But even he broke down under the strain, jumping from a window. He managed only to break his legs, but his suicide bid was interpreted as conclusive evidence of his guilt. Liu Shaoqi was disparaging: 'He should have jumped head first, he dropped down with his feet in front of him.' Deng Xiaoping also shrugged off the episode: 'He dived like an ice lolly.'<sup>7</sup>

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Even before Luo Ruiqing sealed his own fate, another obstacle on the road to revolution was removed. Around the time that Khrushchev had denounced Stalin in 1956, clerks had started using tape recorders to ensure that their transcripts of major party conferences were accurate. Mao grumbled when two



years later even his meetings with local leaders started being recorded. But he exploded when in 1961 his flirtations with Zhang Yufeng, the female attendant on his air-conditioned East German train, were caught on tape. Yang Shangkun, head of the General Office in charge of technical and logistical affairs, was spared, as several of his underlings took the fall. But Mao wondered whether his colleagues were collecting material to tarnish his reputation, possibly even preparing a report similar to the one Khrushchev had delivered on his former boss.<sup>8</sup>

The Chairman's paranoia increased after the coup against Khrushchev in October 1964. But, most of all, Mao was preparing the terrain for revolution. He wanted somebody he could trust with the paper flow through the party machine. In November 1965, Yang Shangkun was removed from his post and replaced by Wang Dongxing, one of the Chairman's most trusted bodyguards.

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In early 1957, when the Chairman had appealed to intellectuals to air their grievances and help party members improve their work, Peng Zhen had used his clout as the mayor of Beijing to hold the campaign back. The *People's Daily*, based in the capital, took several weeks to publicise Mao Zedong's most important speeches on the Hundred Flowers. Deng Tuo, chief editor of the party's official organ, was following cues from the mayor. Many of Mao's colleagues were dismayed by the Hundred Flowers, especially Liu Shaoqi, who feared that the situation might spiral out of control if people were encouraged to vent their grievances. But none pushed defiance as far as Peng Zhen. A burly, hardened revolutionary who had little time for books and newspapers, he had played a key role in the persecution of intellectuals in Yan'an in the early 1940s. After liberation he transformed Beijing from a sleepy backwater into a communist capital of 6 million people, and little happened in the city without his consent.<sup>9</sup>

Peng Zhen eventually fell into line, but years later the Chairman complained that his control of the capital was so tight that 'you can't poke a hole in it with a needle or force a single drop of water through'.<sup>10</sup>

Peng and Liu, of course, were proven right: in the spring of 1957 people took to the streets in an outpouring of discontent with communist rule, forcing the party to backtrack. A ruthless campaign of repression started, and Peng Zhen made sure that no stone was left unturned in the capital. Soon throngs of students, teachers, artists and writers could be seen at the railway station, wearing heavy cotton-padded clothes and clunky winter shoes, some with coarse sheepskin overcoats under their arms, waiting to depart for labour camps in the Great Northern Wilderness.<sup>11</sup>

Peng Zhen was also in charge of the Group of Five, charged by the party with purifying literature and the arts in July 1964. It was an appropriate choice, given the relish with which Peng had persecuted intellectuals in 1942 and again in 1957. But his role as chief prosecutor in the field of culture, combined with his grip on the capital, were obstacles the Chairman sought to remove.

Mao first tried to undermine him through Kang Sheng, who was one of the Group of Five. As work teams were sent around the country during the Socialist Education Campaign, Kang decided to focus on Peking University. His hope was that, by scrutinising one institution, he could undermine the entire city, as had happened in Baiyin. A work group was dispatched in July 1964, finding a willing collaborator in Nie Yuanzi, party secretary of the philosophy department. The group secretly examined the files of every cadre and declared that the party committee of the university was 'rotten to the core'. Peng Zhen was enraged. A new inquiry was held, hundreds of investigators now poring over every aspect of the university's activities, including its relationship with the Beijing Municipal Party Committee. They concluded that the university and the municipality had colluded in taking a 'bourgeois line'. Peng Zhen, with the help of several members of the capital's party committee, denounced the 'wild criticisms' of the work team in January 1965. Two months later, Deng Xiaoping rallied to the mayor's defence, condemning the work team for having gone too far. Kang Sheng was criticised in all but name. More than sixty cadres who had been accused of 'anti-party' activities were rehabilitated.<sup>12</sup>

As Kang Sheng's strategy started to backfire, Mao opted for a more elaborate approach, sending his wife on a secret mission to Shanghai in February 1965. Jiang Qing had already cut her teeth in the field of theatre. Now the plan was to denounce another historical play, one in which an upright mandarin named Hai Rui confronted a tyrannical emperor and was dismissed for his honesty. Its author was Wu Han, a prominent historian and vice-mayor under Peng Zhen.

The use of historical allusion as a means of political attack had a long tradition in China, but in this case the Chairman himself had urged party leaders to study the character of Hai Rui in the first half of 1959. Mao was fascinated by the Ming-era official, who was both courageous in speaking out to the emperor and genuinely loyal to him. Most of all, Hai Rui accused not the emperor himself, but rather his misguided ministers. Mao used this historical figure to blame the party leadership for the mounting disaster caused by the Great Leap Forward. He had been told lies by his underlings and fed inflated statistics on the grain output. To promote the Hai Rui spirit, plays were staged, articles published, biographies written.<sup>13</sup>

But after the purge of Peng Dehuai in the summer of 1959, the political climate changed completely. It now seemed that the marshal who had spoken out at the Lushan plenum was Hai Rui. Wu Han's play, entitled *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*, could be read in a very different light: 'In your early years you may have done a few good deeds. But now? The country has been dissatisfied with you for a long time, a fact known by all officials of the inner and outer courts. So set on cultivating the Tao, you have become bewitched; so bent upon dictatorial ways, you have become dogmatic and biased.'<sup>14</sup>

A revised play written by Wu Han was performed in Beijing in February 1961, and its allegorical significance must have been clear to some leading party officials. During the fateful Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in January 1962, behind the scenes a few of them had started to compare Peng Dehuai to Hai Rui. The play was not staged again, but remained popular in print. In the immediate aftermath of the famine, there was little the Chairman could do about it.<sup>15</sup>

Jiang Qing knew Shanghai well from her actress days. The port city was a bastion of communism with a long history of labour unrest, run by a powerful mayor named Ke Qingshi who had the Chairman's trust. Two of the mayor's henchmen came forward to help Madame Mao. Both would become part of what was later called the 'Gang of Four'. One was Zhang Chunqiao, a taciturn, brooding man who was director of propaganda in the Shanghai party machine. The other was Yao Wenyuan, a stout young man with a round face who, in 1955, had enthusiastically joined a campaign against Hu Feng, the famous writer who had excoriated official dogma. When a string of intellectuals were condemned as members of the 'Hu Feng clique' and sentenced to do hard labour, Yao rejoiced, ready to use his pen again to help the Chairman.

Yao became a hatchet man. On Jiang Qing's advice, he retired to a sanatorium for the summer, pretending to be ill, and wrote a lengthy diatribe against the play, accusing Wu Han of supporting private farming and obliquely criticising the Great Leap Forward. It took nine drafts, three of which Mao personally edited. Even then, it was a turgid piece of prose running to 10,000 words.

Mao was in Shanghai to oversee the opening volley of the Cultural Revolution, published in two local newspapers on 10 November 1965, the very same day that Yang Shangkun was dismissed.

Peng Zhen had a choice. If he shielded Wu Han – a friend, colleague and respected intellectual – he could be accused of allowing the capital to harbour revisionist elements at the highest level. If he turned against him, he would be exposed for failing to spot the danger in the first place. The mayor tried to sidestep the issue by forbidding the *People's Daily* and other newspapers in Beijing to reprint the article. After Zhou Enlai had telephoned Peng Zhen to tell him that the Chairman himself was behind the polemic, he relented, but tried to argue that the debate about the allegorical connection between Hai Rui and Peng Dehuai was a purely academic one. In February 1966, with his Group of Five, Peng went to seek guidance from the

Chairman, now hunkering down in a secluded villa on the shore of East Lake in Wuhan. During the meeting Kang Sheng, one of the five members, denounced the play as a ‘poisonous weed’, but Peng Zhen insisted on portraying the whole affair as a scholarly controversy. Mao feigned ignorance and brushed off the conflict, adding: ‘You people work it out.’<sup>16</sup>

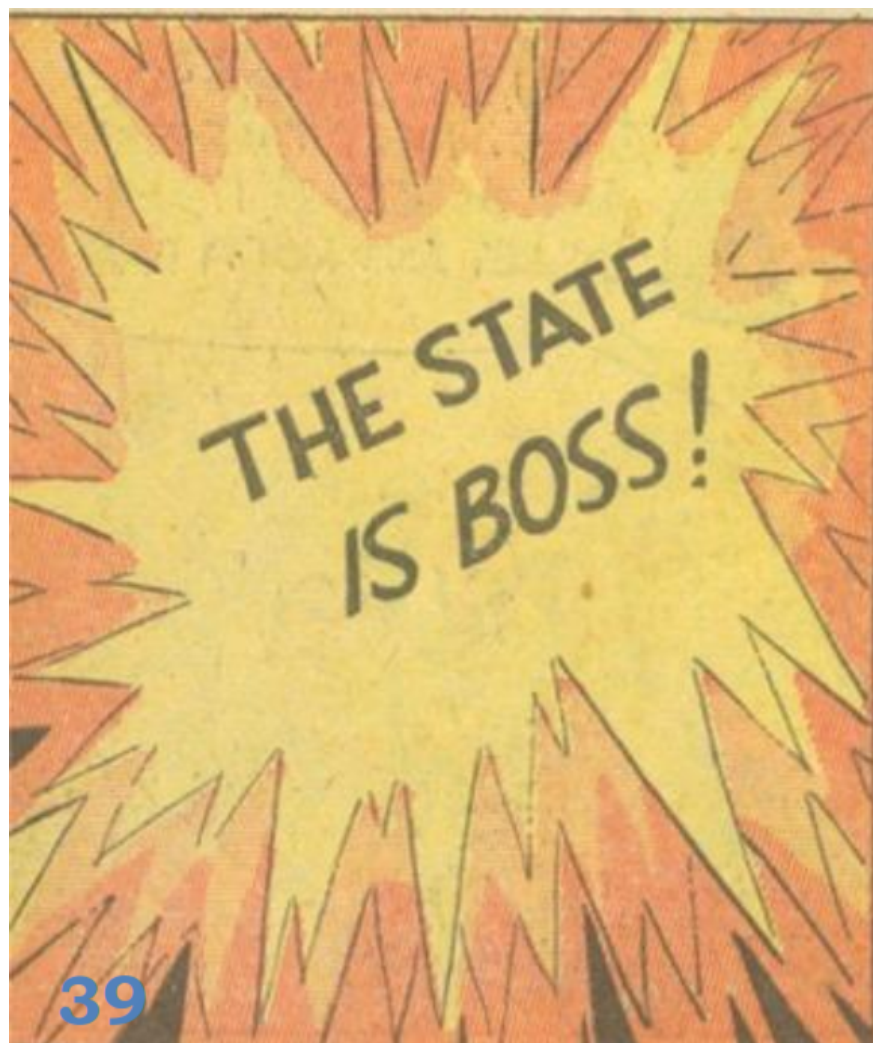
Mao had lulled Peng into a false sense of security. The trap was sprung a month later, as Mao denounced the mayor for ‘running an independent kingdom’. The Beijing Municipal Party Committee, the Chairman told Kang Sheng, should be dissolved for having shielded bad people and opposed the revolution. Kang travelled to Beijing to convey the message to Zhou Enlai, who followed his political instinct and threw in his lot with the Chairman. At a top meeting of party elders, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping gave Peng the coup de grâce, accusing their erstwhile colleague of ‘contravening Mao Zedong Thought’ and ‘opposing Chairman Mao’.<sup>17</sup>

The fourth and final obstacle was Lu Dingyi, the man in charge of propaganda. He was one of the members of the Group of Five, and his fall followed hard upon that of his boss Peng Zhen, with whom he had sided in the controversy over the historical play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*. Like Peng, Lu had been keen to regiment literature and the arts, declaring in December 1964 that the Ministry of Culture was ‘entirely rotten’ and run by the joint forces of capitalism and feudalism.<sup>18</sup> He purged the ministry from top to bottom, but this was not enough. Jiang Qing and Lin Biao, now increasingly working together, convened a meeting in Shanghai in February 1966 to discuss literature and the arts in the army. Their report concluded that since the founding of the People’s Republic, ‘the literary field and most professors have stood as a black force trying to dominate our politics’. Now it was Lu Dingyi’s turn to be purged. He fell from power in March for having ‘vilified’ Mao Zedong Thought.<sup>19</sup>

Mao insisted that all four men – Peng Zhen, Luo Ruiqing, Lu Dingyi and Yang Shangkun – were part of an ‘anti-party clique’ that had been plotting a coup d’état. In front of the party elders, Lin Biao read out the accusation, prepared for him by Kang Sheng on orders from the Chairman. ‘There is a bunch of bastards who want to take a chance and are biding their time. They want to kill us, so we have to crush them! They are fake revolutionaries, they are fake Marxists, they are fake followers of Mao Zedong Thought, they are traitors, they want to betray Chairman Mao as he is still in good health, they overtly agree with him but covertly oppose him, they are careerists, they play tricks, right now they want to kill people, they are using all sorts of tricks to kill people!’

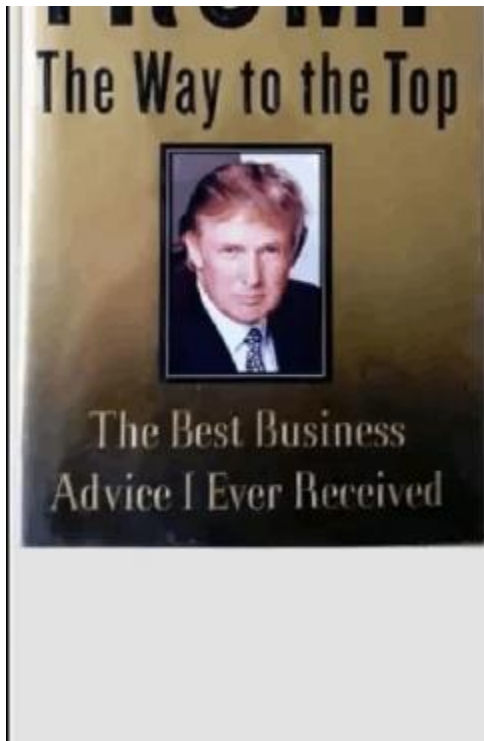
Lin Biao denounced the four conspirators as the leaders of a revisionist, counter-revolutionary clique. He also heaped praise on the Chairman: ‘Isn’t Chairman Mao a genius? Don’t we say that without Chairman Mao there would be no new China? Why is it that others won’t do, and only Chairman Mao will do? Isn’t Mao Zedong Thought creative? If it is not creative, then why would we hold high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought?’ Zhou Enlai threw in his lot with Lin Biao: ‘I entirely agree with comrade Lin’s words, he has spoken very well.’

On 23 May 1966 the four leaders were dismissed. Their fall was a ‘victory for Mao Zedong Thought’, Zhou Enlai gushed, adding that ‘Chairman Mao is a genius leader just like Lenin, he is the leader of all the people of the world!’<sup>20</sup>





## THE RED YEARS (1966–1968)



*Copartner and CEO of Maverick Recording Company*

Four people have given me sound nuggets of wisdom that have helped me keep business in perspective.

When I was nineteen, I complained to David Geffen about some other people in the entertainment business who were making a lot of money and who I didn't think deserved it. David turned to me and said, "You need to be a racehorse. Do you know what racehorses do?" I answered, "They race." David replied, "No, they wear blinders! If they looked to the left or right, they would lose. Don't look to the left and don't look to the right. Wear blinders and race your own race!"

*Never lose perspective*

One day, when my Kabbalah teacher, Eitan Yardeni, asked how I was doing, I told him I needed a break. I was thoroughly exhausted, overwhelmed, and overworked. Eitan then said, "Do you know what you should do now?" I thought he was going to encourage me to take some time off. But instead he replied, "No, go work harder! Be careful what you ask for because you may get it." Eitan was right. If I ask for a break, God may



## Poster Wars

In May 1966, at the end of a rainy spring, a twenty-three-year-old worker employed at a scissor factory in Yangzhou trekked 50 kilometres inland to Purple Mountain, a historic location said to be haunted by spirits. Its peak, now in every shade of green, often vanished in mysterious clouds of gold and purple at sunset. The mountain dominated Nanjing, which had once been the capital of the Ming dynasty. It was the final resting place of several emperors and high-ranking mandarins. Amid the bamboo groves and ancient oak trees growing in the shade of a mausoleum where the Hongwu emperor, founder of the Ming, had been entombed, Chen Zhigao swallowed a vial of cyanide. After a child had glued a poster on his front door with brisk characters reading ‘Embrace Deng Tuo!’, he had been unable to bear the pressure. He became one of the first ordinary people to fall victim to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Yao Wenyuan’s essay had unleashed a whirlwind against Wu Han in November 1965. Peng Zhen asked Deng Tuo, the man who years earlier had delayed the publication of the Chairman’s main speeches on the Hundred Flowers, to write in defence of Wu Han. After both Peng and Wu had fallen from power, Deng was next in the line of fire. On 6 May 1966, the *People’s Daily* – now firmly in the hands of Mao – denounced him and several of his acolytes. In the wake of the Great Leap Forward, they had written hundreds of essays that had appeared in magazines controlled by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, and their writings were now alleged to have attacked the Chairman through historical allegory and satire. Ten days later, on 16 May, the *People’s Daily* demanded blood: ‘What kind of person is Deng Tuo? Investigations now reveal that he is a traitor.’<sup>2</sup> Two days later, Deng took a large dose of sleeping pills and died at home, surrounded by a sprawling collection of rare calligraphy and ancient paintings that he had been able to amass as a leading hack under Peng Zhen.

The *People’s Daily* was the party’s mouthpiece, with its editorials carefully studied across the nation, read out at meetings, broadcast over the radio and posted in display cases at busy street intersections. In middle schools, party secretaries denounced Wu Han, Deng Tuo and their followers before assembled student bodies. For several years, students had been brought up in the militant doctrine of ‘class struggle’, and the Socialist Education Campaign had warned them of class enemies lurking in every corner, plotting to overthrow the party. Like the model soldier Lei Feng, many were eager to become loyal fighters for Chairman Mao.

Now they were given a task. They set to work, having been asked to write big-character posters. Bundles of brush pens, bottles of ink and stacks of old newspapers were provided. Cauldrons were set up to make glue from sweet-potato starch. Big, bold characters were painted on the newspapers, sometimes one to a sheet, and then they were pasted on walls with a broom. Soon the headlines were plastered across the country: ‘Smash the Black Gang!’, ‘Down with the Anti-Socialist Cabal!’, ‘Carry the Revolution Through to the End!’<sup>3</sup>

Some of the more politically astute students also spent time in the library, studying commentaries and editorials from the *People’s Daily* and other newspapers to understand what was wrong with Wu Han and his followers. They were on the alert for incriminating evidence, and every day fresh posters reported the latest findings. In Zhengding, a city where several schools of Buddhism had been founded, a group of students claimed to have identified a sword hanging over Chairman Mao’s head in a photograph that showed him standing on the rostrum in Tiananmen Square. The search spread, and soon problems were discovered with short stories, novels, movies and plays. Many of the young activists tried to imitate the prose style of Yao Wenyuan, the man who had brought down Wu Han with his pen. Gao Yuan, one of the students in Zhengding, explained: ‘The method was, first, to declare yourself a defender of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought; second, to pose a series of accusatory questions about your target; and third, to expose it as yet another example of counter-revolutionary infiltration of the Party.’<sup>4</sup>

Still, while some of the students were thirsty for action, many of their teachers were confused. Some actually defended Wu Han. In a middle school in Jinan, an entire article was penned to refute Yao Wenyuan’s allegations. But most were cautious, and for good reason. Unlike the students, they remembered the Hundred Flowers. One teacher who had been labelled a rightist in 1957 had an inkling that the Cultural Revolution would be worse: ‘This time around, with the Cultural Revolution, we teachers are in the dock. It will be even worse than the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957.’ Many waited to see in which direction the wind would blow: ‘It’s best not to say too much, if you say something wrong you will be in trouble.’ A few were so worried that they sought out the school’s party secretary to volunteer a full confession of their ideological mistakes, hoping for leniency. Posters appeared questioning the background of some teachers.<sup>5</sup>

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Even more excitement followed as the entire Beijing Municipal Party Committee was reorganised. While the clique of four was still being denounced behind closed doors, a notice was circulated within the party ranks on 16 May to announce that Peng Zhen had turned the capital into a citadel of revisionism. Mao called on the whole party to ‘repudiate those representatives of the bourgeoisie who have sneaked into the party, the government, the army and various cultural circles’. They were a ‘bunch of counter-revolutionary revisionists’. They wanted to seize political power and turn the dictatorship of the proletariat into a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie as soon as conditions were ripe. Mao issued a dire warning: ‘Some of them we have already seen through, others we have not. Some are still trusted by us and are being trained as our successors, persons like Khrushchev, for example, who are still nestling beside us.’<sup>6</sup>

The message sent a chill through the party ranks. If the powerful head of the capital could fall, others might soon follow. Party members started eyeing each other across the table at meetings where the Chairman’s words were studied. A few began to believe that the only safe option was to trust nobody but the Chairman himself: ‘Right now I feel that Chairman Mao is the only one we can trust . . . we must doubt all others, we must denounce anyone who does not follow the Chairman’s instructions.’<sup>7</sup>

Ordinary people who read the *People’s Daily* had an inkling that something was happening in the corridors of power. Wild rumours started circulating. Some alleged that Peng Zhen was bringing troops to the capital. Others whispered that criminals were being recruited from the prisons in Beijing in a final showdown. The fact that Mao had not been seen in public for many months only deepened the mystery.<sup>8</sup>

Mao, meanwhile, moved to dissolve the small Group of Five headed by Peng Zhen. A Cultural Revolution Group appeared instead, stacked with the Chairman’s cronies. The group would soon direct the entire course of the Cultural Revolution, becoming the most important political organ by which all the top decisions were made. Like the inner courts created by emperors to bypass the opposition of their cabinets, the group would rule over party, state and army.

The group’s head was Chen Boda, a mean, petty and ambitious man with a heavy Fujianese accent who had been trained in Moscow in the 1930s.

Chen became the Chairman's ghostwriter in Yan'an, and served as one of his political secretaries after liberation. In 1958 he welcomed the Great Leap Forward as the dawn of communism. Two years later, he absolved his master of all responsibility for the catastrophe, claiming that the millions of deaths were 'an unavoidable phenomenon in our forward march'.<sup>9</sup>

The Cultural Revolution Group included Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao, as well as several other close followers of the Chairman. Its composition would change with every shift in the balance of power, but it would remain in the eye of the storm throughout much of the Cultural Revolution. The group moved into two buildings at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, a complex located a few kilometres to the west of the Forbidden City. Surrounded by lakes and gardens, the site had been a favourite fishing spot of the Zhangzong emperor in the twelfth century, although the buildings themselves, like the Great Hall of the People, had been erected in 1959. The group soon took over another four buildings, with a crew of telephonists, typists, recorders and other assistants who helped to deal with the several bags of telegrams and letters that arrived from every corner of the country each day. Madame Mao took up permanent residence in its quarters, safely ensconced as chaos raged outside.<sup>10</sup>

On 1 June, celebrated as International Children's Day, the Cultural Revolution Group dropped its first bombshell. Written by Chen Boda, an inflammatory editorial in the *People's Daily* urged the population to 'Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!' It was the public inauguration of the Cultural Revolution, as people were urged to sweep away the representatives of the bourgeoisie who were trying to 'deceive, fool and benumb the working people in order to consolidate their reactionary state power'. The editorial singled out the 'bourgeois specialists', 'scholarly authorities' and 'venerable masters' who were entrenched in 'ideological and cultural positions'.<sup>11</sup>

As if the editorial was not yet drama enough, that very same evening the Central People's Radio broadcast the text of a big-character poster written by Nie Yuanzi a week earlier. Nie was the party secretary of the philosophy department who had helped Kang Sheng and his work team expose the leadership of Peking University for 'taking the capitalist road' more than a year before. Kang's strategy had backfired, as Peng Zhen had used his political clout to have the work team dismissed in March 1965. Nie was severely criticised and about to lose her job, but in early May 1966 she realised that with the fall of Wu Han and Deng Tuo, the very people who were persecuting her would soon be in trouble. She received a nudge from Kang Sheng, who sent his wife to foment a revolution on campus. On 25 May, Nie put up a big-character poster which claimed that the university was under the control of the bourgeoisie. Its leaders were 'a bunch of Khrushchev-type revisionist elements'. News of the poster spread within minutes. Thousands of similar ones appeared the following day. Kang sent a copy to the Chairman, who opined that the document was 'even more significant than the manifesto of the Paris commune'. He gave it his stamp of approval.<sup>12</sup>

On 2 June, one day after radio stations all over the country had broadcast the full text of the poster, it was printed in the *People's Daily*. Classes in the capital were suspended. The following day the fall of Peng Zhen finally became public knowledge, as a new Beijing Municipal Party Committee was inaugurated. Portraits of Mao flanked by red flags with hammer and sickle were hoisted above the main entrance of the party headquarters. Arc lamps flooded the building with light, as lorries conveyed one delegation after another to express their support for the new leadership. Schoolchildren cheered, their cheeks painted red. Firecrackers were lit, drums rolled, cymbals clashed. The demonstration finally tapered off at 8.00 the following morning.<sup>13</sup>

To heighten the tension, a mass trial took place on 13 June in the Workers' Stadium, a huge concrete structure built in 1959 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Chinese Revolution, like the Great Hall of the People and the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. Yang Guoqing, a nineteen-year-old from Beijing, was accused of having stabbed two foreigners a month earlier. In front of television cameras, Yang was led on to a raised platform by three policemen. He bowed his head, submitting to the fury of a crowd of 13,000 people who raised their fists at every slogan, chanting in chorus: 'Never Forget Class Struggle', 'Down with the Counter-Revolutionaries'.<sup>14</sup>

China was now in the grip of a militant campaign against counter-revolutionary plots, seen to be everywhere. In every town and city, large placards went up bearing full-length portraits of the Chairman. His sayings proliferated on the walls of factories, offices and schools. In the streets, according to one observer, the number of slogans alerting readers to the dangers of a revisionist coup 'seemed to have multiplied by ten'. Across the country, the militia were put on alert. They practised Morse code, prepared for air raids and trained in bayonet fighting. Girls as young as six took part, shouting 'kill' in shrill voices as they lunged forward. In some factories in Jinan, the capital of Shandong, model aeroplanes were stretched on wires between buildings for anti-aircraft practice. In Qingdao, the province's main port, squads of militia crowded the streets, armed with rifles and light machine guns. Foreign powers, it was feared, could use Shandong as a beachhead for the invasion of China.<sup>15</sup>

Further inland the situation was similar. Travelling along the Yangtze River, Alan Donald, with years of experience at the British mission in Beijing, wrote: 'I had never seen, at any time during my stay in China, such a visual and aural attack on the propaganda plane.' Exhortations to revolutionary vigilance against anti-party groups were common, with slogans daubed on walls, printed in newspapers, broadcast over loudspeakers and, in the countryside, even placed on moveable boards.<sup>16</sup>

But the clearest indication of what the Chairman had in mind was evident in Yan'an, the crucible of revolution where the communists had holed up decades earlier during the Second World War. Cut off from the rest of the country, isolated from Moscow except for intermittent radio contact, they had turned austerity into a virtue with the principle of self-reliance. Throughout the base areas under their control, grassroots units assumed responsibility for the livelihood of all of their members. Specialisation was banned, as the ideal communist man was simultaneously soldier, worker and student, fusing with the collective in war and work alike. Students were required to contribute to the revolution through manual labour, while soldiers were asked to immerse themselves in political study.

Yan'an became the capital of red tourism in the summer of 1966, as throngs of visitors were shown documentaries about reclamation projects, with long lines of soldiers hacking away at the rough mountainside, convinced that selfless perseverance and collective action could change the face of nature. In communes and factories in Yan'an, the most popular text was 'The Foolish Old Man who Moved the Mountain', a traditional tale given a new twist by Mao in 1945.<sup>17</sup> A ninety-year-old man, so the story went, had tried to remove a mountain that obstructed his view with a hoe and a basket. When asked how he would ever complete the task, he had answered that the mountain would eventually be carted off if his children, and their children and other generations after them, would persevere. Mao reinterpreted the tale by saying that imperialism and feudalism were two mountains oppressing the people, but through sheer willpower and hard work they would be cleared away. It would become one of the three most frequently read stories from the Little Red Book during the Cultural Revolution.

Mao himself had praised the Yan'an spirit a month earlier, writing to Lin Biao on 7 May to state that the army should carry out 'military-educational, military-agricultural, military-industrial and military-civilian work', aiming 'to unite the army and people as one'. Workers, likewise, should 'learn military affairs, politics and culture', while students 'ought to learn industrial, agricultural and military work in addition to class work'. Mao's letter was widely distributed in the following weeks. What the Chairman projected was a fanatical vision of military organisation and political indoctrination in which every man and every woman became a soldier. China was moving forward to the past.<sup>18</sup>



The moment Nie Yuanzi's accusation against Peking University was broadcast on 1 June 1966, posters went up in offices, factories and schools across the nation. Some were as big as a door, written in black ink with the main accusations underlined in red. Others were lengthy diatribes denouncing local leaders for betraying the party, corrupting the people, undermining the revolution or even working for a capitalist restoration. But Nie had put up her text at exactly the spot where posters had appeared ten years earlier during the Hundred Flowers. As readers pressed around these hoardings, they wondered what to make of it all. In 1956 the party had called on everybody to speak out, only to denounce the critics a year later. Were the authors of these posters disciplined party members dedicated to the revolution? 'Or are they self-seekers, troublemakers, anti-party and anti-socialist elements, themselves counter-revolutionaries?' as one participant in the Foreign Language Bureau in Beijing put it. Some cynics suggested that they were mere agents of the party, inciting people to stick out their necks until the axe fell.<sup>19</sup>

The leadership was just as confounded. Having stirred up the party with his message on 16 May, Mao went into retreat, staying away from the capital: 'Let others stay busy with politics.' Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, left to their own devices, decided to do what the party always did. They agreed on a well-established routine, namely sending in work teams to lead the Cultural Revolution. Still, they flew to Hangzhou to solicit the Chairman's consent. He remained evasive, refusing to be pinned down. 'Let them handle the problems of the movement by themselves,' he told his doctor after the two leaders had left. Then the Chairman sat back and watched the country descend into chaos.<sup>20</sup>

Tens of thousands of cadres were sent to join work teams in educational units across the capital, from middle schools to publishing companies. The largest one, entering Tsinghua University on 9 June, had more than 500 members, including Liu Shaoqi's wife Wang Guangmei. The rest of the country took its lead from the capital and also hastily dispatched work teams. Wherever they went, they found the schools and colleges under their care plastered with big-character posters.

The work teams encouraged the students to denounce the 'monsters and demons' who, according to the earlier editorial in the *People's Daily*, had monopolised culture to oppress the working people. The students needed little encouragement. For weeks they had been tracking the followers of Wu Han and Deng Tuo, and the more radical ones among them had already started scrutinising the backgrounds of some of their own professors. Class enemies were no longer abstract shadows of the past, but real people threatening to drag the country back to the days of feudal exploitation. Soon the posters about Wu Han were buried by layers of denunciations against teachers.

Spurred on by the work teams, at first the students lashed out at faculty members who had humiliated them in the past. Rae Yang, a fifteen-year-old student at one of the most prestigious middle schools of Beijing, took to task a teacher who had reprimanded her in front of all the other students, accusing her in a shrill voice of lacking proletarian feelings when she had grumbled about physical labour. The teacher was exactly the kind of person who, in the Chairman's words, 'treated the students as their enemies'. Dipping her brush pen in black ink, Rae wrote a poster that used the very rhetorical devices that the teacher had used against her: the teacher, she wrote, had lacked proletarian feelings towards her students and suppressed differing opinions. One of her classmates castigated a tutor whom he had caught rifling through the students' desks and reading their diaries during class breaks. As the students began to scrutinise textbooks, teaching methods and even the faculty themselves, more dirty secrets were exposed as other posters went up.<sup>21</sup>

Some students were more circumspect, or reluctant to join the campaign against teachers with whom they had established a good relationship. In Chengdu, Jung Chang was instinctively averse to all militant activities and frightened of the violence that screamed from the wall posters. Aged fourteen, she began to play truant. But there was no standing on the sidelines. At interminable meetings she was criticised for 'putting family first'.<sup>22</sup>

Some 1,500 kilometres away from Chengdu, in the coastal city of Xiamen overlooking the small archipelago of Quemoy, still administered by Taiwan, the work team produced a blacklist of suspect teachers. One was accused of having been a member of Chiang Kai-shek's party, another was linked to the nationalist Youth Corps during the Second World War. 'Now it is in front of you,' the work team told Ken Ling, one of the school's students. 'Let's see what stand you take.'<sup>23</sup>

Soon teachers started hurling accusations against each other in order to save themselves, leading to furious poster wars. They knew far more about each other than students could possibly discover, and some had access to confidential records or boasted powerful contacts further up the echelons of power. As they blackened each other's reputations, they dug further and further into the past, accusing one another of having colluded with counter-revolutionary elements, secretly joined underground organisations or sexually abused members of the proletariat. A few wrote self-criticisms or produced false confessions in the hope of gaining clemency. The list of accusations grew longer. In Zhengding there were 'hooligans and bad eggs, filthy rich peasants and son-of-a-bitch landlords, bloodsucking capitalists and neo-bourgeoisie, historical counter-revolutionaries and active counter-revolutionaries, rightists and ultra-rightists, alien class elements and degenerate elements, reactionaries and opportunists, counter-revolutionary revisionists, imperialist running dogs and spies'.<sup>24</sup>

As an atmosphere of hatred was whipped up, the war of words started to escalate into physical attacks on the targets singled out by the work teams. Some victims were made to carry dunces' caps, and others had placards hung around their necks, identifying them as 'Running Dogs of Capitalism', 'Black Gang Elements', 'Imperialist Spies' or other incriminating categories. Many were paraded around the campus, pushed and shoved, sometimes splashed with ink. As the days went by, the dunces' caps became longer and heavier, the wooden placards larger and weightier. Sometimes they were replaced by buckets filled with rocks. This happened to the principal of Ken Ling's school, who carried a load so heavy that the wire cut deep into his neck. He and others were forced to march around the campus barefoot, hitting broken gongs or pots, declaiming their crimes: 'I am a Black Gang Element!'<sup>25</sup>

Beatings came soon enough. After all, this was class struggle, a fight to the death against an implacable enemy. As students egged each other on, trying to outdo each other in their demonstrations of revolutionary fervour, the abuse intensified. Some of the accused had their heads shaved, others were given so-called yin and yang haircuts, where only one half of the head was shorn. Some were exposed to the summer heat for hours on end. In Xiamen a few were forced to kneel on broken glass. The majority of these torture methods had been commonly used on class enemies since liberation, most recently during the Socialist Education Campaign. But one was new, namely the jet-plane position, perfected by Wang Guangmei two years earlier. On campuses across Fujian province, dozens died or committed suicide after being tormented by students in June and early July.<sup>26</sup>

Counter-revolutionary monsters and demons had to be segregated from the community, and many of the suspects were locked up at night in makeshift prisons, disparagingly called 'cow sheds': these included storehouses, classrooms and dormitories. The most reliable students were assigned to sentry duty by the work teams. Some armed themselves with improvised weapons, others rummaged through the sports equipment room and used fencing foils, wooden swords and metal javelins. 'I felt the same kind of excitement I had felt playing spy games in primary school,' Gao Yuan remembered.<sup>27</sup>

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At this early stage of the Cultural Revolution, the violence remained very much confined to secondary schools, and even there it varied enormously in scope and intensity. Zhai Zhenhua, the young girl who had modelled herself on Lei Feng, dutifully denounced some of her teachers, but once the walls in

her elite middle school in Beijing had been covered in posters, the pace of the revolution began to slacken.<sup>28</sup>

But where was the attack on the ‘authorities within the party who take the capitalist road’, those enemies ‘nestling beside us’ that so preoccupied the Chairman? In schools and universities, the work teams deflected most of the ire towards teachers and students considered to be ‘black elements’, using them as scapegoats or sacrificing a few local cadres to protect leading officials. They clamped down on anyone seen to voice a critical opinion of the party. In Zhengding, one of Gao Yuan’s friends put up a poster denouncing the party secretary of the school, but the work team defused the assault by forcing the student to make a public apology. Similar incidents took place in other secondary schools across the country.

Perhaps the most significant confrontation occurred at Tsinghua University, where a bespectacled, heavily built student of chemical engineering named Kuai Dafu speculated publicly whether the ‘power in the hands of the work team represents us’. Wang Guangmei, who had just joined the work team, declared that ‘the rightist student Kuai Dafu wants to seize power’. A few days later, Kuai was denounced as a counter-revolutionary, humiliated along with dozens of his supporters in front of the assembled student body and locked up in his dormitory.<sup>29</sup>

Wang Guangmei interpreted the Cultural Revolution as a new version of the anti-rightist campaign that had followed the Hundred Flowers nine years earlier. She thought that her mandate was to expose teachers and students like Kuai Dafu who were opposed to the party. She was not alone in this conviction. Bo Yibo, the powerful vice-premier in charge of industry, instructed members of his work team in language uncannily reminiscent of the Hundred Flowers to ‘trick the snakes into leaving their pit’, suppressing them once they had revealed their true colours by speaking out. Liu Shaoqi gave similar instructions to members of the work team he was guiding himself at an elite middle school attached to Beijing Normal University: ‘The leadership must learn to pick the right moment, waiting until most of the monsters have already exposed themselves, and launch the counter-attack in a timely manner. Those anti-party and anti-socialist elements within colleges and universities must be dragged out.’ Liu even set a quota of 1 per cent for the number of students and teachers in schools and universities to be denounced as rightists, amounting to an astounding projected total of 300,000 victims for the country as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

Within weeks, more than 10,000 students in the capital alone had been branded as ‘rightists’. In Peking University, scores were condemned as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ for parading and humiliating the president of the university on 18 June. A mutinous mood of open defiance against the work teams spread. In dozens of colleges and universities, the work teams were thrown out by radical students, only to be sent back in by Liu Shaoqi to quell the opposition.

The unrest was not limited to Beijing. After one of their schoolmates had been condemned as a rightist for putting up a poster calling the president of the Communication University a ‘capitalist roader’, students in Xi’an went on a hunger strike, sitting in silent protest opposite the party headquarters for three days in a row. When the provincial authorities refused to budge, students from other universities joined the protesters. Soon there were scenes of chaos, with nurses administering intravenous drips to children who had fainted from dehydration in the summer heat and students being rushed to hospital for emergency treatment. Students sent representatives to Beijing, prompting Zhou Enlai to intervene to break the impasse.<sup>31</sup>

In Lanzhou, a city along the upper reaches of the Yellow River, surrounded by loess hills in barren Gansu province, the work team broadcast a message warning students that all those who sent telegrams to complain to leaders in Beijing would be designated as counter-revolutionaries. The persecution was such that one student threw himself in front of a train, while another jumped from a building.<sup>32</sup>

Work teams also clamped down on factories. In the Shanghai Number Seventeen Cotton Textile Mill, a handsome young head of security called Wang Hongwen, soon to rise to glory as one of the Gang of Four, pioneered the Cultural Revolution by denouncing the use of piece rates rather than fixed wages to increase output. He and his followers stirred up discontent among the factory’s 8,000 workers. By the end of June a work team was sent in to counter-attack, persecuting those who had spoken out. Several hundred workers were denounced as ‘anti-party elements’, while Wang was labelled a ‘self-seeking careerist’.<sup>33</sup>

Liu Shaoqi was rapidly becoming the most detested leader in the country. His work teams were turning vast numbers of people into martyrs. Mao was ready to return to Beijing.



Mao had cultivated an aura of enigma, shunning the spotlight and travelling the country in great secrecy for months on end. Even his colleagues were not always sure where to find him. A popular ditty during the Socialist Education Campaign was 'Father is Close, Mother is Close, but Neither is as Close as Chairman Mao'. In reality the leader was a remote figure, never heard on radio, rarely seen in public.

On 16 July 1966, the Chairman signalled his return to public life, taking a celebrated swim in the Yangtze River. He used the strong current to float downstream and emerge on the other side of the river an hour later, 'with ruddy cheeks and buoyant spirit'. The news was broadcast all over the country, squashing rumours about his health. 'He showed no sign of fatigue,' the papers gushed, comparing the wind and waves to the black storm kicked up by imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries: China would triumphantly ride it out. Photos showed the Chairman standing on a boat, dressed in a robe and waving his hand. Mao penned a poem to mark the occasion. 'I care not that the wind blows and the waves beat; it is better than idly strolling in a courtyard.'<sup>1</sup>

Celebratory parades were organised with lanterns, drums and firecrackers. A swimming craze followed: how else could one brave the wind and waters and emulate the Chairman? In Beijing, 8,000 people, some of them soldiers in full uniform, swam across the water at the Summer Palace, a sprawling imperial domain with lakes, gardens and pavilions. In Shanghai, a floating lido appeared between the pontoons, designed for port workers keen to swim during their lunch break. In Zhengding, Gao Yuan and his friends were taken to a local river, where they entered the water in their gym shorts. They merely paddled around in the shallow end, but there were casualties elsewhere. In Nanjing, thousands flocked to the Xuanwu Lake in Nanjing each day after a section had been cordoned off and opened as an outdoor swimming pool on 17 July. Several people drowned every day.<sup>2</sup>

Two days after his swim, Mao was back in Beijing. In a further symbolic gesture, he refused to move back into Zhongnanhai but took up temporary residence in the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, where the Cultural Revolution Group had established its offices. A day later, as Liu Shaoqi was summoned to Diaoyutai, Mao opened fire: 'I have been feeling deeply aggrieved since I returned to Beijing. The place is cold and cheerless. Some colleges have closed their gates. Some are even suppressing the student movement. Who is it who suppresses the student movement?'<sup>3</sup>

He sent out members of the Cultural Revolution Group to undermine the work teams. On her way back to Beijing, his wife stopped in Nanjing to warn the leadership that support for the work teams was not the same as support for the Chairman. 'Don't blindly put your faith in the work teams,' she explained. 'The power of those leaders who are fundamentally on our side should be strengthened, the power of those who are fundamentally against us should be seized.'<sup>4</sup>

Then, on 21 July, Chen Boda sent two members of the Cultural Revolution Group to visit Kuai Dafu, still under detention at Tsinghua University. It was a direct snub to Wang Guangmei, who had condemned Kuai as a 'rightist'. Two days later Madame Mao, flanked by Chen Boda, appeared at Peking University, declaring that they had come on the orders of the Chairman to 'learn from the students'. In a statement greeted with an outburst of cheering from a jubilant crowd, they overturned the verdict of the work team that one month earlier had condemned riotous students as 'counter-revolutionaries'.<sup>5</sup>

On 24 July, Mao, dressed in white pyjamas, received several party leaders in a large room on the ground floor of his residence in the Diaoyutai complex. He scolded them for 'fearing the masses' and 'suppressing the students'. He demanded that the work teams be dismissed.<sup>6</sup>

Work teams apologised and disbanded. In Zhai Zhenhua's elite school, they left 'without even a word of farewell'. Rebel students were exonerated. All of them embraced Mao as their liberator.<sup>7</sup>

The official announcement was made in the Great Hall of the People on 29 July 1966. Years earlier some 7,000 leading officials had assembled to confront the catastrophe unleashed by the Great Leap Forward. Now more than 10,000 students from schools and colleges crowded the premises. Kuai Dafu, released from his cell at Tsinghua University and ferried to the meeting by car, was fêted as a hero. Nie Yuanzi, now chair of a newly elected revolutionary committee at Peking University, basked in glory. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were forced to make a public self-criticism, taking responsibility for having organised the work teams in the Chairman's absence. Mao, sitting behind a curtain at the back of the stage, listened intently. When Liu admitted that they did not yet understand how to carry out the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, as they were 'old revolutionaries facing new problems', Mao snorted. 'What old revolutionaries? Old counter-revolutionaries is more like it.' At the end of the meeting, as the curtains parted, Chairman Mao unexpectedly stepped on to the stage, appearing as if by magic. The crowd erupted in a roar of excitement. 'I simply could not believe my eyes!' one student later wrote in his diary. As the Chairman paced the stage, slowly waving, his face impassive, the cheering audience started thundering out rhythmic chants: 'Long Live Chairman Mao! Long Live Chairman Mao!' Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping looked on in a daze. As the chants echoed throughout the auditorium, Mao left in triumph. Zhou Enlai trailed behind 'like a faithful dog'.<sup>8</sup>

Much as Peng Zhen had been forced to make an impossible choice when his vice-mayor Wu Han had come under attack months earlier, Mao's skilful manoeuvring left Liu Shaoqi in a predicament. Had he allowed the schools and colleges to erupt in demonstrations against the party, Mao could have accused him of letting counter-revolutionary forces run amok. When Liu decided instead to muzzle the most outspoken critics, the Chairman turned around and blamed him for 'suppressing the masses'.

A plenum was hurriedly convened in early August to endorse the Chairman's views. Many Central Committee members were absent, sensing trouble. Mao set the tone on the second day, accusing Liu of 'running a dictatorship' and 'aligning himself with the bourgeois class' during his absence from Beijing. 'Why do we talk about democracy all day long, and then when democracy finally arrives we fear it?' Still, many of the party elders failed to rally behind the Chairman with sufficient enthusiasm, prompting more ire from Mao, who accused some of them of being 'monsters and demons'. On 6 August, he called in reinforcements, much as he had done at the fateful Lushan plenum in the summer of 1959. Lin Biao was ordered back to the capital and asked to denounce Liu Shaoqi. He threw his full weight behind the Chairman, promising that the Cultural Revolution would 'turn the world upside down, whip up tempests and make huge waves', to the extent that it would prevent both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat from sleeping 'for six months'. On the final day of the plenum, as the Central Committee elected a new, all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee of eleven members by secret ballot, Lin Biao took over from Liu Shaoqi as number two and heir apparent.<sup>9</sup>

The most important statement issued by the Central Committee during the plenum was its 'Decision on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', widely propagated on 8 August. It proclaimed that the main target of the attack was 'those in power within the party taking the capitalist road'. But as soon as the leadership had sanctioned the Cultural Revolution, real power shifted towards the Cultural Revolution Group. Mao had effectively captured the decision-making organs of the country.

The 'Decision on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' became rapidly known as the 'Sixteen Articles', as it listed under sixteen headings the first guidelines on how to implement the Cultural Revolution. The document was read out over the radio in a deliberate, solemn tone: 'Trust the masses, rely on them and respect their initiative. Make the fullest use of big-character posters and great debates to argue matters out, so that the masses can clarify the correct views and expose all the monsters and demons.' In factories, offices and schools, people were stunned into silence, as they strained to catch every word broadcast through the loudspeakers. 'Be on guard against those who branded the revolutionary masses as "counter-revolutionaries",' the announcement continued. Everyone listening to the broadcast realised that the tide had just turned. Those members of the party who had tried to deflect denunciations made in big-character posters over the summer by calling their accusers 'counter-revolutionaries' now had the charge hurled back at them by the very voice of the party.<sup>10</sup>

The broadcast came three days after the Chairman had scribbled his own big-character poster, entitled 'Bombard the Headquarters'. In pithy and incendiary language, Mao denounced those 'leading comrades' who had 'adopted the reactionary stand of the bourgeoisie' and had repressed the 'surging movement of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. Mao accused them of having 'encircled and suppressed revolutionaries' in a reign of 'white terror'. His note would not be published for another year, but it was leaked almost immediately.<sup>11</sup>

The very people who had been accused of being 'rightists' and 'counter-revolutionaries' over the summer now closed ranks behind the Chairman. Those who had been defamed and locked up by work teams turned the tables against their erstwhile tormentors. In factories in Changsha, the capital of Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan, workers put up posters as soon as the work teams withdrew, using the Cultural Revolution to retaliate against their superiors for everything they had done wrong in the past. They attacked party leaders for curbing their freedom of speech. 'They accused the leaders of taking home government property and using influence to get scarce goods and special privileges. They denounced one leader for insulting women by touching their shoulders when he spoke to them, and another for wearing slippers to work and taking off his shirt in the office.' The list of crimes grew longer by the day, with everything apparently fair game.<sup>12</sup>

Not all work teams withdrew. In some cases they had the support of workers who feared the chaos unleashed by the Cultural Revolution. In the Number Seventeen Cotton Textile Mill, where Wang Hongwen and others had been branded as 'anti-party elements', many of the employees sided with the leadership, as the work team continued to direct the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

In order to keep abreast of the campaign and find out where one stood, reading posters became essential. They soon moved out of the corridors of offices, factories and schools to colonise every available space, into the vestibules, up the lower walls of main buildings, then across pavements and floors, and finally down from the roof in large slogans. Later that summer even the vermilion walls of the Forbidden City were plastered with belligerent messages. 'Some were like bombs in their effect, exploding and clearing up a situation. Some were like bazooka shells, piercing armour and the thickest hide. Some were grenades, even squibs. Some were artful smokescreens.'

Many organisations started publishing their own bulletins or newspapers, reporting on the most recent developments. More than twenty broadsheets were distributed or sold near Tiananmen Square. As some of them had direct links to the leaders of the Cultural Revolution Group, they relayed privileged information unavailable in official newspapers. People roamed the capital, scanning the walls of the most important government units for new information about the direction of the campaign. As the Cultural Revolution unfolded, unpublished speeches, classified material, secret reports and internal government files made their way on to the streets. For the first time, everybody could obtain a glimpse into the inner workings of the party.<sup>14</sup>

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But one group was more privileged than the others. When the radio broadcast the guidelines of the Cultural Revolution on 8 August, it pointed out that no measures should be taken against students at primary schools, middle schools, colleges and universities.

Mao went straight to the students, seeing in the young his most reliable allies. They were impressionable, easy to manipulate and eager to fight. Most of all, they craved a more active role. 'We have to depend on them to start a rebellion, a revolution. Otherwise we may not be able to overthrow those demons and monsters,' he confided to his doctor.<sup>15</sup>

On 1 August, he sent a personal note of support to a group of youngsters at a middle school attached to Tsinghua University. 'To Rebel is Justified!' the Chairman told them. Two months earlier, these students had established their own organisation, called Red Guards. They were not alone, as students elsewhere in the capital banded together to form groups called Red Flag or East Wind. All of them were inspired by Mao's widely disseminated letter to Lin Biao, in which the Chairman had urged the people to become one with the army, learning military skills in addition to performing their usual tasks – following the model established in Yan'an decades earlier. But the work teams did not tolerate the existence of any organisation established without official approval. In the years following liberation, civil society had gradually been brought under the thumb of the party. From independent political parties, charitable organisations, religious associations and chambers of commerce to trade unions, all were either eliminated or brought under the party's formal supervision. In schools and universities alike, the only organisations with recognised status were the communist party, the Communist League and the Young Pioneers. The work teams ordered the fledgling Red Guards to disband.

Now, with the Chairman's blessing, Red Guards started popping up again. They pledged to defend Chairman Mao and his revolution to the death. Seeing themselves as his faithful fighters, they abandoned their normal clothes and started wearing army uniforms. A few managed to find military clothing from older family members. Chang Jung, as soon as she had enrolled, rushed home and dug out a pale-grey jacket from the bottom of an old trunk. It had been her mother's uniform in the 1950s. Others turned workers' trousers and cotton jackets into simple, baggy uniforms. Some were made to look vintage and worn. Overly fitted uniforms and shiny clothes in general were frowned upon as bourgeois. A leather belt, always handy to whip class enemies, was compulsory. A red cotton armband with gold characters reading 'Red Guard' completed the outfit.<sup>16</sup>

Not everyone was allowed to become a Red Guard. The youngsters praised by Mao for having first organised a Red Guard detachment belonged to an elite middle school administered by Tsinghua University. They were the children of high-ranking cadres and military officers, and they had learned through their parents that revisionists inside the party were opposing the Chairman. In other middle schools, too, the core of students who threw themselves behind the Chairman and formed gangs of Red Guards had parents who were party officials. They had been brought up in an environment dominated by political intrigue, and they had privileged access to classified information. Most of all, they were already well organised, having joined the many activities that had been offered during the Socialist Education Campaign, from military training in summer camps to shooting guns in rifle clubs. In a political climate that portrayed the world in terms of an endless class struggle, they felt inherently superior for belonging to the revolutionary class.

Many of them believed that only those with the purest family pedigree could become true Red Guards. They were the children of veteran revolutionaries, and they alone had the class background necessary to lead the Cultural Revolution. They were born red. 'We are born into this world only to rebel against the bourgeoisie and carry the great proletarian revolutionary banner. Sons must take over the power seized by their fathers. This is called passing on the power from generation to generation.' A couplet did the rounds, calling for the exclusion of anyone from a bad class background:

‘If the father is a hero, his son is also a hero. If the father is a reactionary, his son is a bastard.’ In Beijing, no more than one in five students from middle schools were eligible for membership of an exclusive club based on blood.<sup>17</sup>

Red Guards began physically attacking teachers and administrators the moment they heard of Mao’s battle cry ‘To Rebel is Justified’. On 4 August, three days after receiving Mao’s letter of encouragement, the students at Tsinghua University Middle School forced the principal and vice-principal to wear labels denouncing them as ‘Heads of a Black Gang’. Over the following days, the Red Guards took turns to beat them. Some of the students used a club, others preferred a whip or a copper-buckled belt. The vice-principal’s hair was burned.<sup>18</sup>

The first death occurred in a girls’ school administered by Beijing Normal University. Bian Zhongyun, the vice-principal, had already been tortured under the supervision of a work team in late June. The students had spat in her face, filled her mouth with soil, forced a dunce’s cap on her head, tied her hands behind her back and then beaten her black and blue. Now that the work team was gone, the Red Guards were determined to rid the school of bourgeois elements. In the afternoon of 5 August, as they accused five of the school administrators of having formed a ‘Black Gang’, they splashed them with ink, forced them to kneel and hit them with nail-spiked clubs. Bian lost consciousness after several hours of torture. She was dumped into a garbage cart. When her body finally reached the hospital across the street two hours later, she was pronounced dead.

All along, members of the Cultural Revolution Group did the rounds, meeting one batch of Red Guards after another. Already on 28 July, Madame Mao had appeared at Peking University, telling the crowd that ‘we do not advocate beating people, but what’s so special about beating people anyway!’ She offered a further insight: ‘When bad people get beaten by good people, they deserve it. When good people get beaten by bad people, the credit goes to the good people. When good people beat good people it is a misunderstanding that should be cleared up.’<sup>19</sup>

More encouragement came on 13 August, as a mass rally was organised at the Workers’ Stadium. In front of tens of thousands of students, five ordinary citizens who had threatened Red Guards a few weeks earlier were paraded on a stage and denounced as ‘hooligans’. They were beaten and whipped with belts. Zhou Enlai and Wang Renzhong, presiding over the struggle meeting, made no attempt to stop the violence.<sup>20</sup>

In the following days, a wave of terror spread through the schools of Beijing. At Beijing’s 101st Middle School, a prestigious institution where Mao and other central leaders sent their children, more than ten teachers were forced to crawl on a path paved with coal cinders until their knees and palms were burned. At the Beijing Sixth Middle School, across the street from Zhongnanhai, Red Guards wrote ‘Long Live the Red Terror’ on the wall of an interrogation chamber. Later they repainted the slogan with the blood of their victims.

But the biggest show of support came on 18 August, as more than a million young students spilled out on Tiananmen Square. The Red Guards had set off in groups a little after midnight and arrived at the square before daybreak. Some were issued with red silk armbands to replace their own homemade cotton ones. They waited anxiously in the dark. Then, as the sun started rising over the eastern end of the square, Mao came down from the rostrum, wearing a baggy army uniform. He mingled briefly with the crowd, shaking hands. A few hours later some of the students were selected to meet the Chairman and his colleagues from the Cultural Revolution Group. Lin Biao made a lengthy speech, appealing to the excited youngsters to destroy ‘all the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes’.

The high point of the day came when a student named Song Binbin was given the special honour of pinning a Red Guard armband on the Chairman’s sleeve. She was the daughter of a veteran general and student at the school where Bian Zhongyun had been tormented to death two weeks earlier. Song Binbin and other Red Guard leaders had personally reported the news to the Beijing Municipal Party Committee. As the cameras flashed, Mao asked her what the meaning of her given name was. When she replied that Binbin meant ‘suave’, the Chairman suggested that a more fitting name was Yaowu, ‘be martial’. Song Yaowu shot to stardom.<sup>21</sup>

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A wave of violence engulfed the capital after the rally on Tiananmen Square. At the Beijing Third Girls Middle School, the principal was beaten to death. The dean hanged herself. At another middle school near Beijing Normal University the principal was ordered to stand under the hot sun while Red Guards poured boiling water over him. New depths of horror were plumbed at another middle school, this one attached to the Beijing Teachers’ College, as a biology teacher was knocked to the ground, beaten and dragged by her legs through the front door and down the steps, her head bumping against the concrete. She died after being further tormented for several hours. Then the other teachers, rounded up as so many monsters and demons, were forced to take turns and beat her dead body. At elementary schools, where the students were no older than thirteen, some teachers were made to swallow nails and excrement, others had their heads shaved and were forced to slap each other.<sup>22</sup>

The Red Guards also turned against some of their schoolmates. For years they had harboured deep resentment of students from bad family backgrounds who often performed well, having to rely on their marks rather than their status to succeed. Only two years earlier the Chairman had voiced his opposition to an education system he viewed as dangerously meritocratic, demanding that admission of children from ‘exploiting families’ be limited.<sup>23</sup> The Red Guards now craved a system of permanent discrimination. They were born red, their enemies were born black. Students from bad class backgrounds were locked up, forced to carry out heavy labour on campus, humiliated and sometimes tortured to death. Students from families that were neither ‘red’ nor ‘black’, for instance the children of clerks, office workers, technicians and engineers, were allowed to assist the Red Guards.<sup>24</sup>

Violence also spilled out on to the streets. One of the first targets of the Red Guards were the ‘bourgeois intellectuals’ accused of having spewed venom at the socialist system. For months the students had tracked Wu Han, Deng Tuo and their followers, poring over their essays, short stories, plays and novels for the merest hint of revisionist ideology. Now, at long last, they could take them to task. Deng Tuo was already dead, and Wu Han locked away in prison. But there were plenty of other targets. Tian Han, the dramatist whose play about a concubine had offended the Chairman, was repeatedly dragged on to an improvised stage with a heavy placard around his neck, forced to kneel and beaten, as the crowd cheered ‘Down with Tian Han!’

Other prominent intellectuals were also targeted in a wave of violence. Lao She, one of the most celebrated writers and author of the novel *Rickshaw Boy*, had served as a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in the 1920s. Like many others, he was keen to serve the new regime after 1949, but his background got him into trouble. A few days after the mass rally, he and twenty others were taken by lorry to the Temple of Confucius, a serene compound where hundreds of stone tablets, in the shade of ancient cypress trees, recorded the names of generations of scholars who had successfully passed the imperial examinations. Dozens of schoolgirls from the Eighth Middle School stood in two lines, forming a live chain. As the victims were pushed through the human corridor, they were pummelled by the Red Guards, screaming ‘Beat the Black Gang!’ Placards were then hung around their necks, stating their names and alleged crimes, as an official photographer recorded the event. The beatings continued for several hours. A day later, Lao She’s body was found in the shallow end of a lake near his childhood residence. He had a collection of the Chairman’s poems in his pocket.<sup>25</sup>

Ordinary people considered to be from bad class backgrounds were openly persecuted. The family of one of the victims denounced as ‘hooligans’ a week earlier at the Workers’ Stadium were tracked down by Red Guards. They lived near the lake where Lao She’s body was found. The father, an impoverished elderly man named Nan Baoshan, was dragged on to the street and clubbed to death. His second son was beaten and locked inside his



home, where he died of thirst a few days later.<sup>26</sup>

The local street committee had denounced Nan Baoshan and his family to the Red Guards. Throughout the capital, lists appeared on walls, signed by local party committees or police stations. They named people by age and class background. Sometimes their crimes were spelled out: 'Has been Dragging his Feet since Liberation'. More often they were simply labelled 'landlords', 'counter-revolutionaries' or 'bad elements'. 'Wanted' notices also appeared, as the Red Guards hunted down specific targets. In public parks, imperial gardens and ancient temples, there were scenes of victims being flogged with ropes, beaten with clubs or otherwise demeaned and tortured in front of cheering crowds. One member of the British consulate observed an old man shuffling out of a covered market, turned into a temporary prison by the Red Guards, with a denunciation hanging to his knees, a blackened face and blood on the back of his shirt. 'A close second to this spectacle was the sight of two old ladies being stoned by small children.'<sup>27</sup>

Zhai Zhenhua was one of the girls from an elite middle school who joined the Red Guards. The first time she saw a friend remove her belt to beat a victim until his clothes were drenched in blood, she recoiled. But she did not want to fall behind, so she persevered. At first she avoided eye contact with a human target, justifying the beatings by imagining how they were plotting the return of the old society. But after a few beatings she got the hang of it. 'My heart hardened and I became used to the blood. I waved my belt like an automaton and whipped with an empty mind.' Another Red Guard later remembered being taken aback by the explosion of violence in his school, although he soon acquired a taste for blood himself: 'When I first started beating people, I did not quite know how to go about it. I was weak. But soon enough I could hit harder than any other student: no matter how hard you hit, I will hit harder, like a wild animal, till my fists hurt.' Children were the most vicious. For a few, beating a class enemy to a pulp became a favourite pastime.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the targets listed by street committees and the police were rounded up and deported. The Red Guards tried to make the capital 'purer and redder', cleansing the city of class enemies. Old people were being marched through the streets with labels around their necks, their arms tightly bound with cord. Soon a stream of bedraggled humanity was seen at the railway stations in Beijing, as an estimated 77,000 victims, or just under 2 per cent of the total population, were transported to the countryside.<sup>29</sup>

The worst killings took place in the outskirts of the city. In Daxing, a county where the sandy soil produced sweet watermelons, the local cadres ordered the extermination of all landlords and other bad elements, including their offspring. Their justification was a rumour that class enemies were about to exact revenge, overthrow the local party branch and execute their erstwhile tormentors. A night of butchery followed, carefully co-ordinated across several people's communes. Party activists joined the local militia in locking their victims into their own homes or makeshift prisons. They were taken out one by one. Some were clubbed to death, others stabbed with chaff cutters or strangled with wire. Several were electrocuted. Children were hung by their feet and whipped. One eight-year-old girl and her grandmother were buried alive. More than 300 people were killed, including entire families and their children, as the killers wanted to make sure that there would be none left to take revenge years later. Most of the bodies were thrown into disused wells and mass graves. In one case the stench became so overpowering that the villagers had to dig out the bodies and throw them into a pond instead.<sup>30</sup>

An officer from the People's Liberation Army phoned Beijing to report the killings in Daxing, and a report was immediately sent to the Cultural Revolution Group. Nobody lifted a finger.<sup>31</sup> A week earlier, Xie Fuzhi, the minister of public security, had already instructed a group of police officers that 'We must support the Red Guards.' He enjoined the police to 'talk to them and try to make friends with them. Don't give them orders. Don't say it is wrong of them to beat up bad people. If in anger they beat someone to death, then so be it.' The speech was widely circulated.<sup>32</sup>

There are no accurate statistics about the number of victims in Beijing, but in late August more than a hundred people were killed every day. One internal party document reports that, on 26 August, 126 people died at the hands of Red Guards; the following day, 228; the day after, 184; on 29 August, 200. The list goes on. According to a conservative estimate, by late September, as the first wave of violence abated, at least 1,770 people had lost their lives, not including those massacred in the outskirts of the capital.<sup>33</sup>

## Destroying the Old World

The killings were mainly confined to Beijing, where members of the Cultural Revolution Group were in daily contact with the Red Guards. Still, there was plenty of violence in the rest of the country, as students took to heart Mao's battle call 'To Rebel is Justified'. Even before the mass rally on 18 August 1966, students from the Huadong Teachers University in Shanghai arrested more than 150 faculty members at their homes and paraded them on campus, forcing them to wear dunces' caps and heavy boards around their necks reading 'Reactionary Academic Authorities'. At the Fuxing Middle School, founded in 1886 by Elizabeth McKechnie, a missionary nurse whose motto was 'Seek Truth', students attacked some of their teachers with hammers. One of the victims suffered a fractured skull.<sup>1</sup>

The mass rally on Tiananmen Square further prompted students around the country into action. In Changsha, Red Guards started beating students and teachers from 'bad families' the moment they returned from their first meeting with Mao Zedong on Tiananmen Square. Further south, in Guangzhou, a teacher was forced to drink a bottle of ink. After he had been repeatedly kicked in the stomach, the ink he regurgitated was mixed with blood. He later committed suicide. In Xi'an a 'Red Terror Brigade' doused a teacher in petrol and set him alight.<sup>2</sup>

But these were isolated acts. Many students outside the capital, at this early stage of the Cultural Revolution, were still unsure just what level of violence would be tolerated.

The real founding act of Red Guards was a campaign to destroy all remnants of old society. On 18 August, appearing on the rostrum next to Chairman Mao, Lin Biao had exhorted his youthful audience to go forth and destroy 'all the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes'. Feudal ideology had fettered people's minds for thousands of years, and now these cultural remnants were to be destroyed to ensure that the country's revolutionary colour would never fade. Tradition was the dead hand of the past trying to maintain its grip on the living, and it was to be smashed to smithereens. Sidney Rittenberg, an American who had thrown in his lot with the communist party before liberation and knew many of its leaders, was surprised by the fury of the message: 'Everything was smash, smash, smash. I could hardly believe what I heard. These people at the very top were truly planning to destroy everything they had built up over the past two decades, to smash and build something new.'<sup>3</sup>

Lin Biao's appeal was widely disseminated, and a day later Red Guards in Beijing put up posters boldly declaring war on the old world. 'We want to take to task and smash all old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. Barbers, tailors, photographers, book pedlars and others who are at the service of the bourgeois class, none of these are exceptions. We want to rebel against the old world!' High heels, fancy haircuts, short skirts, jeans, bad books, all of these had to be eliminated at once, the Red Guards proclaimed. Printers at the officially sponsored *China Youth Daily* churned out thousands of copies of these inflammatory speeches on 19 August. On the evening of 20 August, bands of Red Guards began roving through the streets of Beijing, attacking anything that smacked of the old order. They changed street names, plastering new revolutionary terms over the old signs. Shops providing services, for instance tailors and barbers, came under attack, as their owners were humiliated, sometimes beaten and forced to close down. By the morning of 22 August, the atmosphere had turned ugly, as the Red Guards started attacking ordinary people, forcibly cutting their hair, slashing narrow trouser legs, chopping off high heels. That very same day, the New China News Agency hailed the Red Guards as 'Mao's little generals', lauding their efforts to sweep away old culture. In a special broadcast, the Central People's Radio spread the news to the rest of the country. The result was a nationwide explosion from 23 to 26 August of Red Guard violence towards anything that smacked of the past. The aftershocks would be felt for months.<sup>4</sup>

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In Zhengding, where Gao Yuan and his schoolmates had already spent an exciting summer persecuting their teachers, the moment they read in the *People's Daily* of the mass rally on Tiananmen Square each class set up its own Red Guards. Those who lacked a good class background were not eligible and walked off in shame. The successful ones put on torn strips of red cloth stencilled with yellow paint. The strips were not quite as elegant as the armband they had spotted on Chairman Mao in the newspapers, but they nonetheless gave them a new sense of importance. A day or two later they followed the news on how Red Guards had smashed old name boards in the capital. They decided to eradicate all traces of the old world in Zhengding, setting off towards the old quarter of the town with a red flag inscribed with 'Red Guard' fluttering at the head of their column. They copied what they had read and heard about the Red Guards in Beijing. They changed street names and attacked the lacquered signboards hanging over small shops. They deprecated pedlars selling their wares for being 'capitalist'. An old woman with bound feet was harassed, forced to stand motionless in the sun for four hours wearing a sign denouncing her as a 'prostitute'. But the biggest target was an ancient archway that symbolised feudal oppression. Thick ropes were attached around the top, the foundations were prized loose with crowbars and the structure was pulled down, reduced to a pile of broken stones. The onion dome of a local mosque posed an even greater challenge, and it took hundreds of Red Guards to bring it down. An old Muslim watchman with a wispy beard who tried to intervene was forced to wear a pig's tail, obtained from the local butcher, around his neck.<sup>5</sup>

Similar scenes played out across the country. In Xiamen, where Ken Ling had managed to join the Red Guards despite his bad family background, teams fanned out through the streets destroying everything old in their path, from ornamental brass knockers and antique shop signs to the dragon-shaped cornices on temples. Each team had its own red flag and marched in formation. Some of them beat drums and gongs, while others went about their business quietly and methodically, following a carefully prepared itinerary with all the addresses marked out by street committees. They gave haircuts to returned overseas students and cut long braids. A simple test was applied to stove-pipe trousers, a fashion also introduced by overseas students: if they were not wide enough to accommodate two bottles, the seams were slit open with a knife. Pointed shoes were confiscated, and high heels sliced off. There was nothing ordinary people could do: when the guidelines of the Cultural Revolution had been broadcast to the nation on 8 August in the so-called 'Sixteen Articles', the party had specified that no measures should be taken against students at primary schools, middle schools, colleges and universities. 'To Rebel is Justified,' the Red Guards cried.<sup>6</sup>

Zhengding and Xiamen were small cities, but an even greater outpouring of destruction took place in Shanghai, a city that had been administered by foreign powers before liberation and never quite managed to shed its image as a decadent, bourgeois stronghold. Every sign of the imperialist past came under attack, as Red Guards chipped, drilled and burned off ornaments from the solid granite buildings along the Bund – renamed Revolutionary Boulevard. Shops selling curios or flowers were smashed. Mattresses, silk, velvet, cosmetics and fashionable clothes, all condemned as bourgeois luxuries, were tossed out and carted away.<sup>7</sup>

More encouragement came from above. On 23 August, the *Liberation Army Daily*, under the thumb of Lin Biao, applauded the Red Guards: 'What you



did was right, and you did it well!’ The following day, another editorial enthused about the campaign, followed by a solemn pledge that the army would stand resolutely behind the Red Guards. ‘Learn from the Red Guards! Respect the Red Guards!’<sup>8</sup>

Now that the army had given them full licence to turn the old world upside down, the Red Guards went on the rampage. Libraries were easy targets, as they worked their way through the stacks, in schools and on campuses, confiscating every volume that looked even vaguely feudal or bourgeois. Book burnings were common. Some were symbolic, with only a few books thrown into the bonfire. Others were conflagrations that lit up the sky for days on end. In Xiamen, the flames leaped three storeys high, as Ken Ling and his comrades fed the fire with sixty litres of kerosene. People came with chairs to watch the spectacle. Under a red sky, some onlookers crowded the roofs of surrounding buildings.<sup>9</sup>

In Shanghai, Red Guards destroyed thousands of books from the Zikawei Library, a scholarly repository of over 200,000 volumes started by Jesuits in 1847. Wen Guanzhong, a local student who had not been allowed to join the Red Guards, observed with interest that foreign books were much harder to burn, as they were protected by sturdy leather covers. In the Huangpu district, where the shopping street of Nanjing Road had been laid waste by the Red Guards, several lorries were working around the clock to take books to the local paper mill for pulping.<sup>10</sup>

Public monuments were assailed. In Shanghai, it took the Red Guards only a few days to demolish eighteen listed historical monuments, including the tomb of Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), the city’s first Christian convert, who had collaborated with the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. Longhua Pagoda, the oldest temple in Shanghai and a towering 44 metres in height, fell victim to the hammers and ropes of the Red Guards. Three thousand ancient scriptures belonging to the temple were reduced to ash. The Confucius Temple, an ancient architectural complex located in a quiet public park, was razed to the ground. Red Guards also tackled St Ignatius Cathedral, next to the Zikawei Library, tearing down the spires and the ceiling before shattering its stained-glass windows. There were many churches in Shanghai, and a report later established that ‘All the articles of worship inside Catholic churches have been destroyed.’<sup>11</sup>

There were scenes of Red Guards toppling the steeples of foreign churches or burning ancient pagodas in most cities. In Qingdao, where the churches had been packed in the years following Mao’s Great Famine, the organ of St Michael’s Cathedral was smashed with hammers, the windows shattered one after the other.<sup>12</sup> In Mount Hengshan, one of the five sacred mountains revered by followers of both Taoism and Buddhism, local cadres and Red Guards collaborated to take down every temple and statue, feeding a hungry fire for three nights.<sup>13</sup>

In a few places the assault on tradition was rebuffed. Qufu, the hometown and resting place of Confucius, had some of the largest compounds and family tombs in the country. Tens of thousands of descendants of the ancient sage had their final resting place in the Confucius Cemetery, a sacred compound with dozens of buildings surrounded by an ancient wall, overgrown with gnarled trees. Local Red Guards repeatedly tried to attack the premises, but the Qufu authorities managed to repel their assaults. Only after more than 200 Red Guards from Beijing had descended on the city were the tombs finally desecrated. Five female corpses, still well preserved, were tied together and hung from a tree. Chen Boda had personally wired his instructions, allowing the graves to be dug up but demanding that the main edifice be preserved as a ‘museum of class education’.<sup>14</sup>

Other cemeteries were easier targets, in particular those belonging to foreigners. Shanghai, before liberation, was a metropolis half as big again as Moscow, with a larger foreign population than any other city except New York. It had some sixty-nine cemeteries with 400,000 graves, and 20,000 of these belonged to foreigners. Headstones were systematically smashed, crosses broken and memorial plaques and inscriptions obliterated with cement or smeared over with paint. Soon the local authorities reported proudly that ‘except for the graves of a few revolutionary martyrs, all the tombstones have basically been completely overturned or smashed to pieces’. One exception was the Ji’an Cemetery, where many foreigners had been reburied in 1951. Guards on duty were able to protect some of the graves. The party intervened instead, deciding to level all tombstones dating from the pre-liberation era, since they were ‘symbols of imperialism’.<sup>15</sup>

In Shanghai, as elsewhere, burials were almost immediately abolished by revolutionary decree in favour of cremation. Within weeks, a brand-new facility appeared in the suburbs, as burn teams worked around the clock to fill the crematoria. In Nanjing, where the authorities also banned burials, Red Guards smashed all the coffins confiscated from funeral parlours.<sup>16</sup>

Nationwide, in 1966 there were roughly 50,000 graves belonging to foreigners. More than half of these were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Many others were defiled, and only one in ten managed to escape undamaged.<sup>17</sup>

Local tombs also suffered. Among the victims was Hai Rui, the official who had been dismissed from office by the Ming emperor. Red Guards destroyed his resting place on Hainan Island.<sup>18</sup>

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On 23 August, Red Guards attacked some thirty-six flower shops in Shanghai. Ornamental plants and flowers were considered wasteful and bourgeois, and in the following days Red Guards rampaged through flowerbeds and hothouses in parks across the city. Elaborate rockeries and goldfish ponds were smashed. Flowers at funerals were prohibited. Complex economic calculations were made to highlight the inherently exploitative nature of growing flowers, as one party hack concluded that the 3 million bunches of fresh flowers sold in Shanghai in 1965 had been cultivated on a surface large enough to produce a year’s supply of grain for 3,000 members of the proletariat.<sup>19</sup>

Dogs had long since disappeared, denounced as a threat to public hygiene before they were hunted down in cities across the country in the early 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Now came a great cat massacre, as Red Guards did the rounds to eliminate the feline symbol of bourgeois decadence. Rae Yang, the fifteen-year-old student who had turned against her teacher in Beijing, tried to smuggle her pet out of the house, but Red Guards noticed something moving in the bag she was carrying and guessed what was hidden inside. They grabbed the bag, swung it round and hit it against a brick wall. The cat mewed wildly. ‘The boys laughed. It was fun. They continued to hit him against the wall.’ Her brother started to cry and begged them to stop but nobody listened. Walking through the streets of the capital at the end of August, people saw dead cats lying by the roadside with their front paws tied together.<sup>21</sup>

Less successful was the attack on racing pigeons, a hobby introduced in the nineteenth century by foreigners. In Shanghai the first Homing Pigeon Club was opened in 1929, and soon local enthusiasts started developing pigeon breeds distinguished by their sense of direction, endurance and speed. By the time the city had been liberated, there were nine different pigeon clubs, all merged into one association under strict government control in 1964. As in Britain, the vast majority of its members were working people, and they kept an estimated 30,000 birds, although a further 20,000 were bred by independent fans without a licence. Their owners were accused of wasting precious grain that could sustain thousands of workers. Red Guards first issued an ultimatum calling for their destruction within two days. Then they did the rounds, smashing some of the racks and lofts that dotted the roofs of Shanghai. The local authorities lent a hand by arresting hundreds of pigeon breeders in the ensuing months. Despite the pressure, pigeon breeding persisted, as people moved their birds away from public view.<sup>22</sup>

But the most frightful development by far was house searches, which started on 23 August and peaked in the following days. Pieces of paper with details of the targets – their name, age, status and address – were passed on to the Red Guards, sometimes by the local police, sometimes by street committees. The Red Guards searched the homes of people from bad class backgrounds for an ever growing list of suspect items: articles of worship,

luxury items, reactionary literature, foreign books, concealed weapons, hidden gold, foreign currency, signs of a decadent lifestyle, portraits of Chiang Kai-shek, old land deeds, documents from the nationalist era, signs of underground activities or incriminating evidence of links with enemies of the regime.

Many of these victims had already been subject to systematic persecution since liberation. They were regularly denounced by the regime, paraded through the streets during every major political campaign, hounded from their jobs and forced to sell their possessions in order to eke out a living for themselves and their dependants. When the Red Guards who had ransacked the Zikawei Library turned up at the home of Wen Guanzhong, the boy who had watched as a bonfire consumed a pile of foreign books, they were astonished by what they saw. His father, who had been a general under Chiang Kai-shek, was in prison in Beijing. His mother had been driven to her death in 1955. Her wet nurse, treated like family, looked after Wen and his two brothers. The Red Guards found nothing but bare walls. There was nothing the Red Guards could take that had not already been pawned or bartered for food.<sup>23</sup>

Nien Cheng, on the other hand, lived in great comfort as the widow of the former manager of a foreign firm in Shanghai, the oil company Shell. The Red Guards turned up on the evening of 30 August, as she was reading William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in her study. There were thirty or forty of them, led by two elderly men and a woman. 'We are the Red Guards. We have come to take revolutionary action against you!' a gangling youth shouted at her, as others dispersed in groups to loot her two-storey house. There was the sound of people walking up and down the stairs, followed by the tinkle of broken glass and heavy knocking on the wall. Crates in a storeroom were opened with pliers, curtains were torn down, mirrors smashed, rare antiques shattered. 'On the floor there were fragments of porcelain in colours of oxblood, imperial yellow, celadon green and blue-and-white.' In the bedroom, Red Guards hammered on the furniture. Bits of silk and fur were flying around under the ceiling fan, as garments were torn to pieces. Trembling with anxiety, Nien Cheng tried to intervene but was kicked in the chest. On the lawn outside, a bonfire was lit, as Red Guards tossed books into the flames. All along her street, smoke rose over the garden walls, permeating the air as the Red Guards burned piles of confiscated goods.

This was merely the beginning. A couple of weeks later, Red Guards arrived from Beijing, armed with leather whips. They were looking for hidden treasure in Nien Cheng's house, and they were far worse: 'They ripped open mattresses, cut the upholstery of the chairs and sofas, removed tiles from the walls of the bathrooms, climbed into the fireplace and poked into the chimney, lifted floorboards, got onto the roof, fished in the water tank under the ceiling, and crawled under the floor to examine the pipes.' The garden was turned into a sea of mud, as the flowerbeds were dug up and plants were pulled from their pots.<sup>24</sup>

Similar scenes were seen in many towns and cities across the country, as people scurried to dispose of compromising items before the Red Guards knocked on their door. In Beijing, Rae Yang's parents burned family letters and old photographs, flushing the ashes down the toilet. In Xi'an, Kang Zhengguo, a young man who was passionate about literature, hid some of his favourite books inside a large earthenware jar. The Red Guards tore up the other books and carted off pieces of furniture.<sup>25</sup>

Some targets of the campaign, knowing that they would be next, went to bed fully clothed, waiting for their turn. Every night there were terrifying sounds of loud knocks on the door, objects breaking, students shouting and children crying. But most ordinary people had no idea when the Red Guards would appear, and what harmless possessions might be seen as suspicious. They lived in fear.<sup>26</sup>

Driven by fear, spite or ambition, some people started informing on their neighbours. Rae Yang, herself a Red Guard, was approached by an old woman who insisted that she and her friends raid the home of a prominent overseas Chinese. In Chengdu, two members of a street committee turned up in Jung Chang's school, denouncing some of their neighbours in grave and mysterious tones, as if they were on a grand mission. The Red Guards found a partly naked woman kneeling in the middle of a room that had already been turned upside down. The stench of faeces and urine permeated the air. The victim's eyes were bulging with fear and desperation as she shrieked for forgiveness. The Red Guards found nothing. Outside the door, one of the informers beamed with satisfaction. 'She had denounced the poor woman out of vindictiveness.'<sup>27</sup>

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Lorries heaped with works of art, musical instruments, linen cupboards and other bourgeois belongings drove to and fro through every city, sometimes blocking the traffic.<sup>28</sup> The plunder was collected and inventoried at a central location in each city, much as the works of art confiscated by the Nazis in Paris went to the Jeu de Paume. In Guangzhou, the Sacred Heart Cathedral, in the very centre of the old town, was selected for this key operation. Modelled on the Basilica of St Clotilde in Paris with imposing twin spires, it was vandalised by the Red Guards before the municipal party committee decided to commandeer it as a sorting house. Mountains of furniture, books and clothes were hoarded in one huge, cavernous space, while more valuable objects were stored in two gatekeeper's rooms. There was a mound of silver rings, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, charms and pendants in one corner, while gold bars were stacked separately against a wall. But what most struck one of the Red Guards, in charge of a pushcart used to deliver the gold to the cathedral, was a sprawling collection of musical boxes. 'It was the first time in my life that I saw musical boxes, and there were a lot of them, over a hundred.'<sup>29</sup>

Meticulous inventories were kept, and many are still extant in the archives. In Wuhan, the capital of Hubei where 20,000 homes were raided, the loot included 319,933 silver dollars, over 3 million yuan in bank deposits, 560,130 yuan in cash, 679 antiques, 3,400 pieces of furniture, 8,439 sealed boxes, 9,428 silver objects, over 91,000 pieces of porcelain, 798 watches, 340 radio sets, 8 nationalist flags, 22 rifles, 971.1 kilos of gold and 1,717 kilos of silver. Across the province as a whole, where 1 per cent of all households were raided, the value of the seized assets was estimated at 200 million yuan. The Red Guards collected more than 4 tonnes in gold alone.<sup>30</sup>

The biggest booty was probably in Shanghai, where Red Guards searched more than a quarter of a million households. Three million collectible antiques and art objects ended up in warehouses, not including jewellery and currency estimated at 600 million yuan.<sup>31</sup>

These lists, of course, reflected a mere fraction of the total. Nien Cheng had to beg the Red Guards not to destroy her collection of rare porcelain but donate it to the state instead. Red Guards had been enjoined to smash the old world, and they thoroughly enjoyed themselves with hammers, axes, crowbars, pliers and bats. Much besides books was consumed by fire. In Xiamen, the list of objects thrown into the flames included 'wooden ancestor tablets, old paper currency, brightly coloured Chinese-style dresses, men's suits, old signboards, movie tickets printed with the original names (now changed) of movie theatres, bamboo mah-jongg tiles, playing cards, foreign cigarettes, curios, antiques, scrolls with calligraphy, Chinese opera stringed instruments, Western violins'.<sup>32</sup>

And the loot was exposed to a plethora of thieving hands. It started with the Red Guards, who lined their pockets with money, jewellery and wristwatches, openly appropriating radios and bicycles in the name of the cause. 'The school dormitories suddenly became plush. Many students were enjoying themselves there with their loot.' There were also common thieves who impersonated Red Guards, doing the rounds to seize their share of the booty. Once the objects had arrived at the central storage, many vanished even before they were inventoried. In Xi'an a mere scribble on a piece of paper was handed to Red Guards who deposited their plunder in the City God Temple.<sup>33</sup>

But the biggest thieves were members of the Cultural Revolution Group. Much as Hermann Göring travelled to Paris twenty times, selecting the very best objects for his own personal collection from the Jeu de Paume, Kang Sheng built up an impressive collection of fine art by visiting the main storage centres around the country. There were prehistoric oracle bones, antique bronzes, ivory seals, precious paintings and more than 12,000 books. A cultured scholar and skilled calligrapher, deeply versed in the classics, Kang was particularly keen on rare rubbings from stone inscriptions, calligraphy scrolls and antique inkstones. Some of the artefacts amassed by Deng Tuo ended up in his possession, as well as the collections of around one hundred other scholars – all persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Kang was not alone. On a single visit in May 1970, Kang Sheng, Chen Boda, Lin Biao’s wife Ye Qun and four of her acolytes more or less emptied an entire warehouse. Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing also divided rare seals and inkstones among themselves.<sup>34</sup>

What the Nazis did not burn, they cherished, but the same could not be said of the Red Guards. The vast majority of the loot was left to rot. In Shanghai, some 600 confiscated pianos were distributed to kindergartens, but many other objects fared badly. This was particularly true of the 5 million books that somehow managed to escape the flames. Many were bundled together and dumped in an attic above a wet market on Fuzhou Road, a street where bookshops used to thrive. On Huqiu Road, once called Museum Road in honour of the Shanghai Museum, set up by the British in 1874, a million rare volumes were stacked up to the ceiling, attacked by vermin and the elements. The situation was worse in the suburbs. In Fengxian, where a new crematorium was opened in September 1966, antique calligraphy scrolls and paintings littered the floor of an improvised storage room, most of them wet, torn and mouldy.<sup>35</sup>

A belated attempt to rescue some of the loot was made by the end of 1966, as restrictions were imposed on the recycling or breaking up of antique bronze bells, ritual containers and statues.<sup>36</sup> A team of specialists from Beijing was put in charge of salvaging what remained, but they faced an uphill battle. Many priceless antique bronzes had already been melted down in foundries or sold off on the black market. Much of the porcelain was smashed to pieces. Still, the team managed to save 281,000 objects and 368,000 books.<sup>37</sup>

If the situation was bad in Shanghai, inland it was far worse. In Wuhan, there were no guards in the storage centres, and by 1968 most of the plunder had been stolen or was damaged beyond repair by vermin and humidity.<sup>38</sup>

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A day after Red Guards had ransacked her home, a party official paid Nien Cheng a visit. He made a sweeping gesture encompassing the entire house, and asked rhetorically: ‘Is it right for you and your daughter to live in a house of nine rooms with four bathrooms when there is such a severe housing shortage in Shanghai? Is it right for you to use wool carpets and have each room filled with rosewood and blackwood furniture when there is a shortage of wood and basic furniture for others? Is it right for you to wear silk and fur and sleep under quilts filled with down?’ Nien was allowed to pack a suitcase before being confined to her room, stripped of all furniture but for a mattress and two chairs. Soon enough she was put under formal arrest and deported to a local gaol. Several working families moved into her house.<sup>39</sup>

The homes of people from bad backgrounds were divided up. Rae Yang, despite being a Red Guard herself, was unable to protect her own family. Her aunt, bedridden with diabetes, was moved into a pantry without windows. Six families from ‘revolutionary backgrounds’ moved into the compound, sharing the house among themselves. They dug up the garden, levelled the roses, turned several corridors into storage rooms and built makeshift kitchens in the courtyard, using salvaged material like broken bricks, plywood planks and pieces of asphalt felt.<sup>40</sup>

The bulk of the victims were ordinary people, but party members tainted by their links to disgraced leaders also suffered. On the campus of Peking University, a party stalwart who had boasted of his ties to Deng Tuo and Peng Zhen found a poster glued to the outside wall of his house. The announcement declared that he had to give up his living quarters to the proletariat. His family had to work feverishly through the night to move their possessions and clear enough space for two other families.<sup>41</sup>

The situation varied from place to place, but archival evidence from Shanghai gives an idea of the scale of the expropriations. A total of 30,000 families were forced to hand over their property deeds to the state. Many were allowed to retain a total living surface of 3 to 5 square metres per family, although rent was due. The vast majority of the victims were classified as ‘bad elements exploiting the proletariat’, being neither intellectuals nor administrators working for the party.<sup>42</sup>

Many more were hounded out of town, but not without first being beaten, spat upon and otherwise humiliated. Red Guards emulated their counterparts in Beijing, cleansing the cities of class enemies. In Shanghai there were harrowing sights of elderly people being frogmarched barefoot through the streets to the railway station, their clothes in tatters, with placards proclaiming their crimes hanging around their necks. A conservative estimate places the number of exiled victims in the country overall at 400,000.<sup>43</sup>



## Mao Cult

The violent outburst against the old world lasted no more than a few weeks, but it had lasting consequences. A drab sense of uniformity set in soon after women who dressed fashionably had been tackled by Red Guards, their heads shorn in public and their faces smeared with lipstick. Long braids, deemed to be feudal, vanished, while makeup, however discreetly applied, was considered a remnant of the past. Men and women preferred plain clothing, with a preference for blue or grey cotton uniforms and black cloth shoes.

Barbers still opened, but offered nothing but proletarian haircuts (short back and sides). Restaurants served only cheap, plain meals. Hawkers and pedlars, selling everything from fruit, vegetables, candy, nuts, cloth, crockery and coal to rattan baskets, were banned once again. Bookstores offered very little beyond the Little Red Book and other writings of the Chairman. Whole categories of people became unemployed. In Nanjing, the number of jobseekers increased tenfold. There were florists, greengrocers, fruit sellers, cobblers, tanners, coppersmiths, papermakers, printers, photographers, painters, dressmakers, embroiderers, bookbinders, undertakers and others. Many were ruined because their shops were forced to close down, while others could no longer make ends meet. The vast majority were poor people.<sup>1</sup>

Entire branches of arts, craft and industry were wiped out. In Guangdong province alone, some 20,000 people had been employed to make artefacts now condemned as 'superstitious'. These products were worth 40 million yuan a year, and ranged from joss sticks to spirit money, burned at traditional funerals to provide the deceased with sufficient income in the afterlife. Only a third of the workforce was redeployed in different branches of industry, although even they fell into destitution, as they were often put on half-pay or deprived of the tools needed to carry out their new trade. Many were reduced to selling all their possessions, including their clothes and furniture. In a small town outside Shantou, south China's second biggest port before liberation and once a major exporter of embroidery, one in five had to survive on less than 3 yuan a month.<sup>2</sup>

The effects of the Cultural Revolution reverberated throughout the industrial sector. The labelling, packaging and contents of every single manufactured product, from toys, textiles, cosmetics and appliances to porcelain, had to be purged of all remnants of the feudal past. A pair of socks, a tube of toothpaste or an enamelled washbasin branded Fairy or Golden Pagoda was an insult to the proletariat. The State Council demanded strict compliance with the demands of the Cultural Revolution, but in Shanghai alone there were close to 6,000 products with a label or design evocative of the past.<sup>3</sup> It took years of overhauling to conform. Two years later, to take but one example, the China Textile Company still had a hoard of 20,000 quilt covers, not to mention 15,000 metres of silk, rendered useless by 'feudal' patterns.<sup>4</sup>

In many cases, an expedient solution was used: stickers with a warning were added to offending goods, while feudal or bourgeois brand names were obliterated with a large red cross, from toys and figurines to poker cards.<sup>5</sup> But this did not always satisfy the consumers, wary of being associated with objects that might be denounced by Red Guards. Sales dropped precipitously. A ceramic jar for chopsticks decorated with a mythical unicorn no longer attracted any buyers, but the same object adorned with revolutionary slogans sold out briskly, despite being twice as expensive.<sup>6</sup>

There were other issues. The works of fallen leaders such as Peng Zhen and Lu Dingyi had to be destroyed as early as August, but the blacklist of books containing 'political errors' grew longer by the month. An even bigger conundrum was Liu Shaoqi. As head of state, his calligraphy graced endless objects, ranging from pottery, porcelain and posters to stationery of every form and shape. As the Cultural Revolution unfolded, few Red Guards were willing to keep a diary with a slogan graced by his hand. In March 1967, the Central Committee ordered that all traces of the renegade be obliterated, but this left the authorities with a further problem. The state generated endless commendations and awards to honour its meritorious citizens, not to mention the usual paperwork, from birth certificates to pension booklets. Many were marked by the former head of state. Disabled army veterans, for instance, complained that their official documents carried his photo on the front and his calligraphy on the back. The Ministry of Internal Affairs became so overwhelmed that it had to delegate the right to remove all offending pages to local representatives.<sup>7</sup>

The very landscape of proletarian culture became difficult to navigate. Shops were renamed, the most common names being Red Flag, Red Guard, The East is Red, Workers, Peasants and Soldiers, Liberation, The Masses, The People and Yan'an. In Shanghai more than a hundred were called Red Guard. Among 230 pharmacies, 200 had a duplicate name. Their windows were all the same. 'Mao's portrait occupies the central position surrounded by red bunting, quotations from his work and placards with important news items.' Their uniform appearance confused everybody.<sup>8</sup>

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When Lin Biao, at the mass rally on 18 August 1966, had called upon the excited young students to strike down 'all the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes', he had also demanded that 'new ideas, new culture, new customs and new habits' be created, all of them thoroughly proletarian. What precisely constituted 'old culture' was vague enough, but it was even less clear how 'new culture' should be defined. Soon enough everybody understood that the only acceptable proletarian culture was the cult of Chairman Mao.

The most visible aspect of this cult was a rash of slogans. They went up everywhere. As one close observer noted: 'There have always been plenty of them in the past but all previous records have now been broken. Every stretch of clean wall must have its carefully inscribed quotation or tribute to Mao.' Some of the favourite slogans were 'Our Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, Great Helmsman' and 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' Shops, factories and schools were plastered with them, a few stretching across the top of entire buildings. Massive brick structures were erected at key points in Beijing, displaying slogans and quotations from the Great Leader. Others carried giant paintings of steely-eyed workers and peasants, determined to smash all capitalist roaders. Quotations were painted on the outside of buses, lorries, cars and vans. Trains had a mounted photograph of Mao on the front of the engine. Even bicycles had a little card with a quotation displayed on the front. Lorries careened through the streets with Red Guards, carrying their red plastic-backed book of quotations and brandishing it at each other like a revolutionary passport.<sup>9</sup>

In this new world steeped in red, all the senses were bombarded. Red Guards on temporary platforms called upon the people to join the revolution in shrill voices. Bystanders were harangued in fiery rhetoric peppered with quotations from the Chairman. High up in the skies, air hostesses on internal flights treated passengers to regular readings from the Little Red Book.

But the most fearful weapon was the loudspeaker. These had long been used in propaganda campaigns, but now they were switched on permanently, spewing out the same quotations – always at full volume. Red Guards read from the Little Red Book in police boxes, connected to loudspeakers on the streets. Gangs of youths paraded through the cities, belting out revolutionary songs praising the Chairman and his thought. The same songs were broadcast on radio, which in turn was connected to loudspeakers in courtyards, schools, factories and government offices. One favourite was 'When

Sailing the Seas, We Depend on the Helmsman’, another ‘The Thought of Mao Zedong Glitters with Golden Light’. One foreigner was taken aback by what he called a ‘ceaseless inferno of sound’, but shrewdly pointed out that it had taught the population to hear without listening.<sup>10</sup>

Much of this new fervour was guided from above, not least by the People’s Liberation Army, which was behind the promotion of the Little Red Book. On 27 August, for instance, a directive from Beijing demanded that only portraits of the Chairman be displayed on public occasions.<sup>11</sup>

But nobody wanted to fall behind in the cult of the leader. As the range of objects condemned as feudal or bourgeois expanded, ordinary people increasingly turned to the only politically safe commodities available – Mao photos, Mao badges, Mao posters and Mao books.

Demand vastly outstripped the quantity of products on offer. The *Selected Readings of Mao Zedong’s Work* was a case in point. There were two formats for the general public. Edition A was designed for the more advanced reader, Edition B for people with a limited educational background. The Ministry of Culture determined that the print run of both editions had to increase from a combined total of 40 million to 60 million in 1966, but there was too little paper to carry out the plan. The production of all ‘unnecessary books’, including leisure magazines, was curbed, and only reprints of important political works were permitted, one example being Lei Feng’s diary. Still it did not suffice to satisfy popular demand. So the official target for the production of machine-made paper shot up, reaching 500 tonnes in 1967. To balance the economy, the national production of soap was cut by 15 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

In Shanghai, seven new factories were built with a total surface area of 16,400 square metres, the size of about three football pitches, to keep up with demand for photos, portraits, posters and books. In Jiangsu province, industrial plants were refitted to print the Little Red Book. Factories making red ink worked around the clock but still ran dry.<sup>13</sup>

The books needed covers – nice, bright and red. The amount of plastic needed for the Little Red Book alone reached 4,000 tonnes by 1968. As early as August 1966, the Ministry of Trade curbed the production of plastic shoes, plastic slippers and plastic toys, as factories around the country geared up to contribute to Mao Zedong Thought.<sup>14</sup>

Posters were particularly popular. Children loved them. Anchee Min, a Red Guard, recalled that ‘To be able to feel closer to Mao, I filled my house with posters.’<sup>15</sup> But here, too, customers were demanding. They had learned the importance of innuendo during the campaign against Wu Han and Deng Tuo, and scrutinised every product for defects that might carry a political connotation. Close to a million posters of the Chairman were withheld after buyers complained that a small, faintly printed character that read ‘pickpocket’ appeared on his shoulder. The Bureau for Public Security immediately investigated, but concluded that it was the result of a mechanical error. Another poster, depicting the Chairman at a mass rally of Red Guards in Beijing, appeared to have a double ‘x’ run through a strand of his hair. Rumours started circulating. Customers, always wary of the ubiquitous counter-revolutionary, returned the poster to the shops.<sup>16</sup>

There were other issues. The regime decried anything that smacked even remotely of capitalism, but how should objects carrying the image of the Chairman be priced? It was more than a philosophical conundrum. Even in a command economy where all the decisions were made by the state, the price of a similar object varied widely. Take a simple plaster bust of the Chairman standing eighteen centimetres high. Customers complained that different department stores in Shanghai charged different prices. A fixed price of 0.37 yuan was introduced, but then some shops started offering discounts, bringing back price differentials that looked suspiciously similar to those of the market economy.<sup>17</sup>

The profit motive was even more ubiquitous when it came to the Mao badge. These badges were extremely popular, and were often used by Red Guards to individualise an otherwise uniform outfit. But here, too, the planned economy struggled to keep up with popular demand. In Shanghai, seventy-five factories worked overtime to churn out 15 million badges a month. Wuhan made about 6 million, but Nanjing only managed a million. It asked for an extra 90 tonnes of pure aluminium to treble its production in 1967. By 1968, the national output stood at more than 50 million badges per month.<sup>18</sup>

It was not enough, and a thriving black market emerged to compete with the state. Some government organisations produced badges for their own members, but expanded their operations into a legal twilight zone, lured by the profit motive. Underground factories appeared, entirely devoted to feeding the black market. They competed with state enterprises for rare resources, stealing aluminium buckets, kettles, pots and pans. Such was the demand that even the protective layer of aluminium used on expensive machinery in factories was ripped away to feed the badge frenzy.<sup>19</sup>

The illegal markets themselves were hardly hidden from view, a few of them attracting crowds of over 10,000 punters, spilling over on to the streets and blocking the traffic. In Shanghai the authorities counted more than thirty of them, mainly located near railway stations and docks. The coveted objects were bartered for goods or sold to the highest bidder. Local officials decried these capitalist activities as ‘extremely disrespectful towards our great leader’, but there was not much that they could do, since Red Guards and other revolutionary organisations policed the markets. In Shanghai a special taskforce of 500 agents was set up, and they prosecuted hundreds of speculators. Most of them escaped with a caution, although more than twenty entrepreneurs were arrested, including one Zhou Abao, who oversaw a criminal gang involved in selling hundreds of kilos of aluminium to a dozen government units.<sup>20</sup>

There were thousands of different badges, a few fashioned crudely from perspex, plastic or even bamboo, some carefully crafted with hand-coloured porcelain, the majority with an aluminium base and a profile image of Mao in gold or silver, invariably looking to the left. Like the Little Red Book, the badge became a symbol of loyalty to the Chairman, and was worn just above the heart. People from bad backgrounds were not allowed to wear them.<sup>21</sup>

Badges were the most hotly traded pieces of private property during the first years of the Cultural Revolution, open to every form of capitalist speculation. Red Guards became expert at recognising the relative value of different badges, and traded them among themselves or used them as currency when they travelled the country. Xu Xiaodi had more than a hundred. When one of her most prized specimens was stolen on a crowded bus in Beijing she cried inconsolably. But the biggest collectors were higher up. Ye Qun, Lin Biao’s wife, amassed thousands of them, presenting her collection to the Chairman on the occasion of his seventy-third birthday on 26 December 1966.<sup>22</sup>

Since so many badges were made illegally, accurate estimates are impossible to reach, but at the height of the revolution some 2 to 5 billion badges had been produced across the country. The amount of aluminium diverted away from other industrial activities was so excessive that in 1969 Mao intervened: ‘Give me back my aeroplanes.’ The fad declined rapidly, and largely ceased after the death of Lin Biao in 1971.<sup>23</sup>



## Linking Up

The violence subsided in late August 1966. In Shanghai, a rumour spread that the municipal authorities were displeased with the Red Guards, and the city began to quieten down. There were still bands of students marching through the streets, singing revolutionary songs and clashing cymbals, but the spark of enthusiasm had died. Many of the slogans started to peel off the walls and windows. Shops opened their doors again. Nien Cheng, like so many other victims of the house raids, contemplated the damage around her.<sup>1</sup>

In Beijing, where most of the killings took place, public acts of violence by Red Guards began to abate in the first days of September and then seemed to cease altogether. The police were in charge again. People were busy sprucing up the city for the National Day celebrations on 1 October.<sup>2</sup>

The lull did not last. The flames of the revolution had to be constantly rekindled, and on 31 August another mass rally was organised in Beijing. This time the Chairman called upon the Red Guards to apply their revolutionary experience to other parts of the country. On 5 September, the State Council announced that travel, board and accommodation would be free for all Red Guards.<sup>3</sup>

Months earlier, after the *People's Daily* had exhorted the nation to 'Sweep Away All Monsters and Demons!', the Chairman had already suggested that students be allowed to travel to Beijing to take part in the Cultural Revolution. But as the work teams dispatched by Liu Shaoqi took over, any attempt to liaise with the authorities in the capital was viewed with a baleful eye. In Lanzhou, the work teams took pre-emptive action by warning that all those who expressed their grievances to Beijing would be treated as 'counter-revolutionaries'. In Xi'an, where students rallied in support of a schoolmate denounced as 'rightist' by staging a hunger strike in front of the provincial party committee, a delegation of students had managed secretly to make its way to Beijing to seek the support of Zhou Enlai.

In early August, the trickle of petitioners travelling to Beijing became a flood, as people sought to have the verdicts passed by work teams overturned. Over a thousand students approached the party headquarters in Zhongnanhai every day, asking for an audience with a party leader. Some were from local schools and universities, but others hailed from the provinces. A few of the first students to seek redress in the capital came from Tianjin, a large city port over a hundred kilometres to the south-east. They marched side by side, singing revolutionary songs and reading quotations from the Little Red Book. Defying wind and rain they persisted, until news of their march reached the Cultural Revolution Group. A special train was sent to bring them to the capital. Others followed their lead. Chen Boda met the Tianjin students on 16 August, two days before the first mass rally on Tiananmen Square, and applauded those who had 'braved strong winds and heavy rain' to come to the 'proletarian revolutionary capital'. He demanded that they take the Cultural Revolution back to their home regions.<sup>4</sup>

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There were compelling reasons for offering free travel to Red Guards. It had taken Mao more than a year of political manoeuvring to break Peng Zhen's hold on the capital. But the Chairman suspected that many other party leaders were running similar 'independent kingdoms' around the country. How could the Cultural Revolution succeed if the main targets, those 'power holders within the party who take the capitalist road', were safely ensconced in their fiefdoms far away from Beijing? All of them were hardened, wily leaders who had honed their survival skills during decades of dog-eat-dog politics. Many deflected the violence away from themselves by encouraging the Red Guards to raid the homes of ordinary people from bad family backgrounds, stigmatised as social outcasts.

A few even turned the Red Guards against their enemies. In Changsha, the mayor fancied himself as a minor version of the Chairman, appearing in a military uniform to perform his own review of the local Red Guards. In the ranks were the sons and daughters of local party members, middle-school students proud to have been born red and eager to attack the enemies of the party. When university students organised their own demonstration, attacking the municipal party committee for harbouring 'capitalist roaders', the mayor denounced them as 'rightists' bent on overthrowing the party. Violent clashes soon followed, as the mayor used Red Guards against other Red Guards.

Similar confrontations occurred elsewhere, as revolutionary students were converted into protective organisations. In Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian, the provincial leader Ye Fei, a veteran general who was born in the Philippines to a Chinese father and a Filipina mother, presided over a mass rally on 21 August, appearing in front of 20,000 Red Guards with a red armband prominently displayed on his sleeve. But further south, in Xiamen, Ken Ling and his fellow Red Guards soon tired of smashing up old temples. They wanted to hunt down the 'capitalist roaders' within the party ranks. Urged along by a senior adviser who had stayed on after the work team had been disbanded, they found a target in the provincial head of the Education Department. Her name was Wang Yugeng. A short, plump woman with a double chin and reddish face, Wang happened to be Ye Fei's wife. She seemed untouchable, but the senior adviser passed on incriminating evidence. Determined to confront her, Ken and some 300 other Red Guards converged on Fuzhou, where Wang addressed a mass rally.

They were vastly outnumbered, as the stadium where the rally was being held had been stacked with thousands of supporters of the provincial party committee. A scuffle broke out after one of Ken's allies seized the microphone and denounced the meeting as a cover-up. After Wang Yugeng had been hurriedly led off stage by security guards, an ugly fistfight broke out as her local supporters turned on her opponents, who were forced to beat a hasty retreat. Three days later, on 29 August, Ken and his rebels were back with reinforcements, as more than a thousand protesters organised a hunger strike on the square in front of the provincial party committee. Among them were Red Guards who had travelled all the way from Beijing. They called themselves 'rebel Red Guards', in opposition to the 'royalist Red Guards' who stood by the provincial party committee.

To protect itself, the provincial party committee whipped up support from some 20,000 local party activists and factory workers. Since workers were banned from joining Red Guard organisations, they formed squadrons of Scarlet Guards instead, harassing their opponents for days on end. Local cadres supplied the Scarlet Guards with food and water. Rumour had it that they received a special allowance and a hard hat from the provincial party committee, as factories stopped production to allow workers to join in the demonstrations.

On the afternoon of 5 September, the same day that transportation, food and lodging became free for Red Guards, Ken's rebel protesters were joined by more than 30,000 rebel Red Guards, converging on Fuzhou from all parts of the country, clamouring for Ye Fei's dismissal. The city descended into chaos, as the two factions fought each other in the streets.<sup>5</sup>

Similar scenes occurred in many other parts of the country. In Shanghai, the lull that had developed after 26 August lasted only a couple of days. Red Guards from Beijing and Tianjin began descending upon the city, bringing more chaos and violence. On 4 and 5 September they besieged the party headquarters, demanding to see Cao Diqu, the mayor who had taken over after Ke Qingshi's untimely death. Calling Cao a 'capitalist roader', they were

determined to hunt him down.<sup>6</sup>

Mao wanted his young combatants to spread the fire of revolution to every corner of the country. The flow went in two directions. Red Guards from Beijing and Tianjin crisscrossed the country, cranking up violence and laying siege to party headquarters where ‘capitalist roaders’ were ensconced. Revolutionary youngsters from the provinces, on the other hand, made their way to Beijing, where they learned the ropes, studying the Cultural Revolution and meeting with members of the Cultural Revolution Group. The Chairman himself reviewed millions of Red Guards. After each mass rally, batches of radicalised students left the capital, ready to take the revolution back home.

In early September, Red Guards from the provinces invaded Beijing. Many arrived by bus, some from places as remote as Wenzhou, a once prosperous treaty port 1,400 kilometres south of Beijing. As many as thirty coaches from Shanxi alone could be seen parked on the main boulevard simultaneously. Even more travelled on trains, with carriages crammed full of young passengers.<sup>7</sup>

Schools and colleges around the country selected delegates to be sent to the capital, who set off with great fanfare to the local railway station, equipped with a canvas shoulder bag, an aluminium flask, a tea cup, toothbrush and towel, and of course the ubiquitous Little Red Book, tucked away in a pocket or rolled inside a quilt. Their most treasured possession was a formal letter of introduction, duly stamped by the local committee in charge of the Cultural Revolution, to be presented at reception centres in each city where the Red Guards intended to stay. Some delegates were given blank forms with an official seal, to be used in case of emergency.

Only students from a good class background were allowed to travel. The first question in China was always ‘What is your class background?’, and the form was no different. But a few people managed to slip through the net. Wen Guanzhong, the young man who lived near the Zikawei Library in Shanghai, had maintained a good relationship with some Red Guards in his school. They agreed to let him go and introduced him as a member of the ‘Revolutionary Masses’ in his travel document.<sup>8</sup>

Red Guards left in high spirits. They sang revolutionary songs on the train, played cards or told each other stories. There were boisterous food fights, as some of the excited youngsters threw orange peel and eggshells at one another.

But as more delegates got on board, space soon ran out. They occupied every available inch, sitting on each other’s laps, on the backs of the seats and on the small tables dividing pairs of seats. ‘Some squatted in the aisles, others lay on the luggage racks, and still others had squeezed into the lavatories.’ When trains came to a halt in the countryside, local ruffians walked up to the windows, feigning interest in the revolutionary cause. Just as the train started to move, they would snatch the watches from their wrists, grab bags hanging out of the windows and even whisk glasses off people’s noses. Some of them pulled knives. When Ken and his schoolmates travelled to Shanghai, several hundred beggars forced their train to a standstill at a small railway station in Zhejiang province. They used iron bars to pry open the doors and smash the windows, trying to force their way inside. Some hung on to the windows when the train began to pull out, or tried to seize hold of passengers inside, screaming ‘Let’s die together!’<sup>9</sup>

Food soon ran out, but in any case nobody wanted to eat or drink more than the bare minimum. The toilets were always full, and no one wanted to leave the train at stops to relieve themselves for fear of never being able to get back on again. It was easier for the boys, who would pull down their trousers and urinate out of the window while the train was moving. But it was misery for the girls. A bad smell spread, as urine mixed with sweat, vomit and excrement. Some carriages became so wet that Red Guards used their knives to pry open a hole in the floor. Trains became moving prisons.

Tensions flared, especially on long journeys, as trains moved at a snail’s pace, taking many days to reach the capital from the south. Sometimes wooden baggage racks collapsed under the weight of dozens of people. Doors were locked, and sick or injured passengers had to be passed on to security troops on the platform through the windows. Red Guards started fighting each other for space. Fistfights broke out between rival groups. Ordinary passengers took advantage of the chaos to force their way aboard without tickets.

As travelling youngsters spilled out of trains in their thousands every day in Beijing, all wearing red armbands and speaking mutually unintelligible dialects, the railway station became a vast transit camp. Huge slogans welcomed them as ‘Chairman Mao’s little guests’. In the middle of the night, searchlights illuminated the square in front of the station. Loudspeakers blared out instructions, directing new arrivals to the reception rooms in a corner of the station, a Soviet-style structure with two clock towers, topped by curving roofs of glazed tiles. There were rows of students sleeping in their quilts. Every available space in Beijing was pressed into service, as Red Guards were sent in batches to makeshift dormitories in universities, schools, hotels and even government offices.

Gao Yuan and his schoolmates were sent to Beijing’s elite 101st Middle School. Within an hour they learned a valuable lesson: the school’s Red Guards, who weeks earlier had forced teachers to crawl on cinders, treated them like country bumpkins, refusing to have anything to do with them. They were taken on another ride, ending up in a primary school near Drum Tower, where they slept on straw mats on the floor of the auditorium.<sup>10</sup>

Jung Chang was luckier, as her group was assigned to Tsinghua University, one of the most prestigious in the country. Ken and his friends were also billeted there, sleeping in a large classroom on the eighth floor. The stench was overwhelming. Many Red Guards had no change of clothes and did not bathe for weeks on end. The quilted covers, passed from one delegation to the next, were rarely washed, and the toilets down the corridor were overflowing, spreading sewage over the tiled floor. ‘Even today I can still smell the latrines,’ Jung recorded.<sup>11</sup>

Beijing was stretched to breaking point. At the peak of the campaign there were 3 million visitors in the city on top of a permanent population of 7.7 million. Food was commandeered from the surrounding countryside to feed the capital. Chaos set in. One rebel worker, arriving from Shanghai at the offices of the powerful All-China Trade Union in the middle of the winter, was shocked when he saw the floors covered in rubbish and a flow of excrement, frozen solid by the cold. He wondered: ‘What is this? Is this hell or hallowed revolutionary ground?’<sup>12</sup>

The Red Guards complained, but none apparently spared a thought for the cleaners – referred to in communist parlance as the ‘proletariat’ – who had to sort out the mess, forced to plunge their arms down toilets to unblock the sewage. In Shanghai the situation was made worse by visitors who were unfamiliar with sitting toilets and squatted on them instead. When several cleaners refused to carry on, complaining that the stench made them vomit, they were told that ‘what stinks is not so much the excrement as your own ideology’.<sup>13</sup>

Fights were frequent, and not just over ideology. There was great friction between Red Guards from different parts of the country, and quarrels broke out over food, living quarters and theft, which was endemic. One of the many officers deployed by the army to help with the logistics of looking after hundreds of thousands of youngsters noted that they tended to behave when under strict supervision, but attacked each other as soon as they were left to their own devices. Some fights involved dozens of Red Guards, who went for each other with fists and belts. On his first morning at Tsinghua University, Ken walked past a student with a broken skull who had been thrown from the fourth floor. Nobody seemed to care.<sup>14</sup>

Travel in the capital was free, and many students did the rounds, transcribing entire texts in their notebooks when reading big-character posters outside government buildings and on university campuses. In some of the ministries, mat screens were erected to provide more space for hanging posters. Electric lights were hung in front of every screen, so that people could come and read at night.

The Red Guards also queued up, sometimes for hours at a stretch, to buy Mao badges. A thriving black market competed with beleaguered shops. Among the pine trees on the south side of Tiananmen Square, ten small photos of the Chairman could be traded for one badge. But as the weather gradually turned cold in November, many students were reluctant to leave their heated rooms until noon. Some had no money to spend, and little interest in the revolution. They were there to eat, sleep and pick the occasional fight.<sup>15</sup>

There were mass meetings with members of the Cultural Revolution Group, talks by leading officers from the People's Liberation Army, and even classes in military training. But, most of all, the Red Guards had come to Beijing to see the Chairman. After the two mass rallies of 18 and 31 August, a further six reviews of Red Guards were held in Beijing. By the time the last one took place on 26 November 1966, Mao had appeared in front of 12 million Red Guards.

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The Chairman initiated the mass rallies to ignite the spark of revolution. But by October they had become a necessity. Despite repeated warnings that they could not remain in the capital for ever, the Red Guards refused to leave until they had seen the Chairman. Mao had to review them by the million. In the end, when even the giant square in front of the Forbidden City could no longer contain them, he rode through the city in an open jeep, reaching 2 million students in one fell swoop.

Preparations for each rally started early, as Red Guards were marched in groups or ferried by a fleet of 6,000 lorries to the square in the middle of the night. The rallies were never announced in advance, and students who were unlucky enough to have just washed their only set of clothes had to go along soaking wet. Some marched for hours. Security guards searched the students for dangerous articles such as knives and metal objects, including keys. One soldier confiscated a hairpin, insisting that it could be used to assassinate the Chairman. The students were ordered to sit in rows, each group having an allocated position. As the hours went by, many of them dozed off, leaning their heads against others. Puddles of urine started to appear, as nobody could reach the latrines.<sup>16</sup>

Time seemed to stand still, but after hours of waiting word spread through the ranks: 'Here he is! Here he is!' People jumped up, standing on their toes, craning their necks, seeking a glimpse of the Chairman. They surged forward, shouting 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' Not all managed to see the Great Helmsman. One student who had walked to the square with wet clothes on his back could just make out the leader in the distance. The Chairman was not as tall as he had imagined. On the other hand, the Red Guard who had been in charge of delivering confiscated gold to the cathedral in Guangzhou saw the Chairman very clearly. He had a pair of binoculars with him, filched a month earlier during a raid on a bourgeois family.<sup>17</sup>

Many were ecstatic. Some would remember the moment they saw the Chairman as the highlight of their lives. Jung Chang, disappointed at catching no more than a glimpse of the Chairman's back, his right arm steadily waving, already knew what the girl standing next to her would say, as the sentence had been publicised endlessly by press, radio and television after every mass rally in Beijing: 'I am the happiest person in the world today. I have seen our Great Leader Chairman Mao!'<sup>18</sup>

But propaganda documentaries of the mass rallies, showing hysterical Red Guards waving the Little Red Book, projected a deceptively uniform image. Wang Rongfen, a student of German at the Foreign Languages Institute, attended the first mass rally in Tiananmen Square on 18 August. She could not help but feel that the keynote speech given by Lin Biao resembled Adolf Hitler's orations at the Nuremberg rallies. A month later she sent the Chairman a letter, pointing out that 'the Cultural Revolution is not a mass movement. It is one man with a gun manipulating the people.' The nineteen-year-old student was arrested and sent to prison for thirteen years.<sup>19</sup>

She was hardly alone. Liu Wenzhong belonged to a Shanghai family ostracised as 'counter-revolutionaries'. He was schooled at home by his elder brother. While other students were taking part in the Socialist Education Campaign, he was taught to respect human rights and cherish democracy. He referred to the Chairman as a despot even before the Cultural Revolution began. On Tiananmen Square he stood a mere 30 metres away from Mao, close enough to see the mole on his chin. He was overcome by a sense of dread while those around him cheered.<sup>20</sup>

Ken, on the other hand, had grown cynical enough to wonder whether the fat man with the slightly disdainful look, staring ahead in the distance as he stiffly raised his arm, was a double. Ken had seen scenes in the movie theatres of Red Guards cheering, jumping and shedding tears. No matter how hard he tried, he could not bring himself to match the excitement. 'It all seemed like an act with each one imitating the other.' He felt slightly nauseated.<sup>21</sup>

The cameras captured the rallies, but not their aftermath. The Red Guards had been warned to tighten their shoes, but as they surged forward, thousands still managed to lose their footwear during each rally. They were collected and dumped in huge heaps in a nearby stadium, where students in flimsy socks could be seen poking around trying to retrieve a matching pair.<sup>22</sup>

The final rally was a disaster. Held at an airfield on the outskirts of the capital on 26 November, it was followed by a stampede. As a crowd of 2 million people rushed towards the only available exit, they levelled wheat fields, bent trees and pushed mud huts out of their way. Those who tried to bend down to pick up their belongings or tie their laces were trampled underfoot. A wooden bridge over a stream collapsed, followed by piercing screams. Panic spread, as waves of people were pushed into the stream, forced to wade through the shallow water. Most of it was soaked up by the cotton trousers of the crowd, leaving behind nothing but an expanse of mud. After crossing the stream, the Red Guards started to disperse, but many were now barefoot. In the freezing winter cold, every step hurt. Ken managed to grab a pair of torn cotton plimsolls. Amid scenes of pandemonium, military lorries filled with clothes, socks and shoes sped up and down the only road. Some carried mutilated bodies.<sup>23</sup>

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Of the many lessons the Red Guards learned during their visit to the capital, one stood out: they discovered the generosity of the state. In Beijing queues of students borrowed money and ration coupons. All that was needed was a name and a school affiliation. With no proof of identity required, many Red Guards gave fake names, scattering as soon as they had attended a rally. Instead of taking the revolution back home, they started touring the country. Li Shihua, a Red Guard from Anhui province, put it in a nutshell: 'Everywhere there were reception centres for Red Guards, and food, accommodation and travel were all free; when would such a great opportunity present itself again?'<sup>24</sup>

Li and his friends had little interest in politics. Soon after they had cheered the Chairman on Tiananmen Square, they set off for Wuhan. They were asked to attend a mass meeting held in a giant stadium, where provincial boss Zhang Tixue, just like Ye Fei in Fuzhou, appeared in army uniform to defend the provincial party committee. Song Yaowu, who had shot to fame when she pinned an armband on the Chairman's sleeve during the first mass rally in Beijing, appeared by his side. But as soon as they were allowed to leave, they set off for the East Lake, where Mao had hunkered down before his celebrated swim in the Yangtze River. They visited the Yellow Crane Tower, a sacred Taoist site by the river which had so far survived furious assaults by Red Guards. They marvelled at the imposing Yangtze River Bridge, watching in awe as trains and cars crossed the river on two separate levels. They went on to Changsha, Nanchang, Hangzhou, Shanghai and Nanjing, borrowing clothes and even emergency cash from reception centres around the country. When some of them arrived back home, they were laden with gifts for family and friends. Little did they know that the bill would



follow a few years later. They were among the few in their school who had naively given their real names when touring the country, and the sums of money borrowed were subtracted from their meagre salaries as they worked in re-education camps.<sup>25</sup>

Some students spent months crisscrossing the country, while others became homesick and returned to their families after a couple of weeks. Zhai Zhenhua and her friends set off from Beijing to visit the Three Gorges, where the Yangtze River was forced through steep cliffs and tall mountains. But the boat from Shanghai to Wuhan moved slowly against the current and took a full three days. She and her friends were confined to third-class bunk beds, peering through a porthole. All they saw was muddy water and a monotonous shoreline. She gave up on the Three Gorges and travelled back by train from Wuhan.<sup>26</sup>

Li Shihua and Zhai Zhenhua travelled with friends, and developed deep, lasting bonds on the road. But a few set off alone. Wen Guanzhong, who had managed to obtain a letter of introduction from Red Guards in Shanghai, explored the capital and toured the country. He made fleeting friendships, but moved on swiftly, as he feared that his travelling companions might discover his true class background.<sup>27</sup>

Most students were red tourists, seizing the opportunity to visit the hallowed grounds of revolution of which they had read so often in school. Columns of Red Guards could be seen in Yan'an, all of them eager to explore the cave dwellings where Mao and his fellow revolutionaries had found shelter after the Long March. The Chairman's birthplace in Shaoshan, Hunan province, was similarly overrun by Red Guards, queuing to see the yellow mud-brick house where he had grown up, the school he had attended and the Orange Islet, a narrow river island covered with citrus orchards where the Chairman had sunbathed in his youth.

Another revolutionary site was Jinggang Mountain, where Mao and his ragtag army of a thousand men had set up their first peasant soviet in 1927. The mountain plateau in Jiangxi province was remote, poor and densely wooded. Young people kept on pouring in, triumphant and excited at having reached the cradle of revolution after weeks of travelling. But the local villagers were unable to cope. By December, more than 60,000 Red Guards were arriving every day. A month later, there were thirty times more visitors than locals. The holy ground soon turned into a disaster area, forcing the People's Liberation Army to drop food parcels and medicine by helicopter. A convoy of a hundred lorries was sent to evacuate the area.<sup>28</sup>

Inspired by the Long March, when the Red Army had been forced to retreat from the Jinggang Mountain in 1934–5, trekking all the way north to Yan'an, Red Guards set off on foot in Long March teams. On 22 October 1966 the Cultural Revolution Group encouraged the practice, seeking to reduce the pressure on a transportation system close to collapse. The students followed in the footsteps of the Red Army, striving to experience every hardship their predecessors had suffered to prove themselves worthy inheritors of the revolution. A red banner bearing the name of the Long March team was sometimes held by a Red Guard walking in front of the group. Some young pilgrims attached small boards to their backpacks, inscribed with quotations from the Chairman, so that those following behind could read.<sup>29</sup>

Jinggang Mountain was a disaster, but other small villages along the most popular routes also suffered, as hospitality stations in people's communes had to provide food and shelter. In Hunan there were roadside stands where flasks could be filled with boiled water, while rice was served from wooden barrels. In Jiangxi, on the other hand, the villagers could no longer accommodate the growing number of Red Guards. There were arguments between the students and the locals, as station workers were accused of failing to support the Cultural Revolution.

Even in the cities the strain could be felt, as hard-working people came to resent the way that self-righteous students outstayed their welcome. In Chengdu, Li Zhengan was a poor woman whom sheer destitution had forced to place her four-year-old daughter with another family during Mao's Great Famine. The adoptive family did not like the girl, forcing her to work and confiscating most of her food ration. Li took her child back home after discovering that she was starving and covered in lice. Now, seven years later, her daughter was one of those commandeered to help at a hospitality station, washing the bedding used by Red Guards. The work was tough for the eleven-year-old, who suffered from poor health and severe rheumatism. Having scrimped and saved her entire life, barely able to feed her own family, her mother could not understand why the government wasted so much money on free travel and board for students. Many echoed her sentiments. In Beijing, one of the officers in charge of looking after 12 million visitors could only wonder at the immensity of the cost incurred by those who ultimately had to foot the bill, namely ordinary people. Free board and travel was only abolished on 21 December 1966.<sup>30</sup>

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Red Guards travelled for free, and so did a host of microbes, viruses and bacteria. Of the many diseases that thrived in the overcrowded, unhygienic conditions brought about by revolutionary youngsters, meningitis was the most lethal. An inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord, it was spread through coughing and sneezing. Lack of ventilation in crowded trains and dormitories helped it achieve epidemic proportions.

The disease first appeared in Beijing in August 1966, reaching a peak there a few months later. The alarm was raised, and the Central Committee duly informed, but no preventive measures were taken, as nothing was allowed to impede revolution. At first, students infected in the capital carried the disease to major cities along the railway network, where meningitis developed into an epidemic in November. Then, as students were encouraged to spread the revolution on foot, the disease was transmitted from the cities to the villages. Although free travel was abolished in December, many Red Guards continued to enjoy their newfound freedom. From December 1966 to February 1967, when the Cultural Revolution Group finally called on all Red Guards to go home, meningitis became prevalent along all the major railway routes. At this stage, however, so much of the country was in the grip of the Cultural Revolution that even basic medical supplies such as facemasks were in short supply. As a result, many nurses and doctors treating meningitis patients became infected in their turn.<sup>31</sup>

Most hospitals could not afford facemasks, let alone the drugs used to treat the disease. Scarce financial resources were being channelled into the Cultural Revolution, and the Red Guards paralysed much routine government work. As early as 1964 the Ministry of Health had been thrown into turmoil when Mao accused it of serving the leadership rather than the people. By the autumn of 1966, it was besieged by Red Guards, determined to bring to account the 'capitalist roaders' hiding inside.

The United States offered medical help, but China did not respond. In February 1967, the shortages of antibiotics were such that the government was forced to turn to pharmaceutical companies in Western Europe and Asia, purchasing several hundred metric tonnes of medicine. Control centres were established to co-ordinate nationwide efforts to prevent and treat the disease. But it was too little, too late. By the time the situation had been brought under control, more than 160,000 people had died.

## Rebels and Royalists

Red Guards were proud of their class background, and they tried to keep their ranks pure. When students started to pour into the capital in the last week of August 1966, control squads met them at the station. Thousands of youngsters who belonged to bad families were ejected. Wang Guanghua, a Beijing Sixth Middle School student from a 'capitalist family' who had responded enthusiastically to the Chairman's call to bring revolution to other parts of the country, was kidnapped by a control squad after returning home in late September, and tortured to death for travelling without permission from his school's Red Guards.<sup>1</sup>

But as the weeks went by, the grip of the old Red Guards on the Cultural Revolution loosened. From the beginning, there had been furious debates about who could join their ranks. One of the most discussed documents was a speech given by a Red Guard named Tan Lifu. The son of a high-ranking official, he spoke passionately about the need to keep those who were not born red out of Red Guard organisations. Millions of copies of his speech, delivered on 20 August in Beijing, were printed at all levels of local government, and soon found their way on to every campus. However, in some schools the sons and daughters of local cadres were in the minority. In Xiamen, many of those who became Red Guards in the Eighth Middle School were born 'black'. They were strongly opposed by schoolmates from a revolutionary background, who accused Ken and others of trying to subvert the revolution and inflict 'acts of class revenge' on the proletariat. But these critics were outnumbered.<sup>2</sup>

In Fujian province, it was the Red Guards from Xiamen Eighth Middle School who spearheaded the attack on the provincial party committee, travelling all the way to Fuzhou to confront Ye Fei and his wife Wang Yugeng. In Changsha, it was the university students labelled as 'rightists' who confronted the local party machine. In many parts of the country, divisions appeared between those who dared to question the local leaders and those who rallied to their defence. Soon they were called 'rebels' and 'royalists' or 'conservatives'. Many of the rebels were born 'black'.<sup>3</sup>

The balance of power shifted in October. In Fuzhou, where rebels demonstrated before the provincial party committee, a telegram was sent to the Central Committee in Beijing, denouncing the hunger strike as a counter-revolutionary act organised by hooligans with backing from Taiwan. Many other beleaguered party organisations likewise asked for help from the central authorities. Beijing's answer came on 3 October in an editorial published in the party journal *Red Flag*, edited by Chen Boda: 'The power holders inside the ranks of the party who take the capitalist road are a small bunch of counter-revolutionary revisionists. They raise the red flag in order to fight the red flag. They are like Khrushchev. At the first opportunity, they will plot to usurp the party, the army and the state. They are our most dangerous and principal enemies.' The editorial then denounced those who were following a 'bourgeois reactionary line'.<sup>4</sup>

Two weeks later, Chen Boda for the first time named Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping as the main targets of the Cultural Revolution. He contrasted the 'bourgeois reactionary line' they had been following with Mao Zedong's 'proletarian revolutionary line'. Everywhere, Chen explained, the masses should educate and liberate themselves. He took aim at Tan Lifu's bloodline theory, which he denounced as reactionary. Chen Boda savaged the popular couplet 'If the father is a hero, his son is also a hero,' calling it feudal and 'completely against Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought'. Tan Lifu, who had been catapulted to stardom months earlier, was now accused of opposing the Cultural Revolution. Mass meetings were organised on campuses across China to criticise him. Much as millions of copies of Tan Lifu's speech had been distributed in August, Chen Boda's talk was now widely disseminated, on instructions from the Chairman.<sup>5</sup>

It was a turning point in the Cultural Revolution, as the very meaning of the terms 'red' and 'black' began to shift. Those who were born red suddenly found themselves in the wrong camp, as their parents were denounced as followers of the 'bourgeois reactionary line' promoted by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

Virtually overnight entire Red Guard organisations were suddenly born 'black', as they discovered that their families were labelled as members of a 'Black Gang' plotting to usurp power. Now they became the targets of the revolution they had so fervently supported only weeks earlier. In order to protect their reputations and help their parents survive the onslaught, erstwhile radical youths turned into conservatives, keen to defend the status quo.<sup>6</sup>

Chen Boda's interpretation of Mao's mass line generated huge enthusiasm among students from backgrounds considered to be less than revolutionary. At long last they could now fully participate in the revolution. Those from families that were neither 'red' nor 'black' – they were often described as 'grey' – became rebel Red Guards. Young people from bad backgrounds finally had an opportunity to regroup against their erstwhile tormentors, the old Red Guards. They, too, joined Mao's crusading army against the party establishment. By November, rebel Red Guards were common. Jung Chang remembers meeting an attractive, slim girl with velvety black eyes and long eyelashes on a train full of Red Guards. She was surprised by the quiet confidence with which the girl told her that she was from a 'black' background. It looked as if Chairman Mao was giving ordinary people the courage to stand up and rebel against the red elite.

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The rise of the rebels coincided with a shift in the targets of violence. Local party authorities had so far managed to deflect the thrust of the Cultural Revolution away from themselves, unleashing the Red Guards on to ordinary people, turned into scapegoats for belonging to the wrong class. Now a growing army of rebels laid siege to party leaders suspected of following the 'bourgeois reactionary line'. In Fuzhou, the balance of power shifted away from the provincial party committee. Red Guards from Tsinghua University, Peking University, the Aeronautics Institute and other campuses travelled south to lend a hand. The rebels fanned out to seize strategically located buildings, schools and offices. They requisitioned dozens of vehicles, creating a mobile force that was dispatched across Fuzhou to bolster rebel positions against the opposition. Much of the local population was divided into two camps, leaning either towards the rebels or towards the royalists. Since propaganda was paramount, loudspeakers were mounted in the post office and department stores at key intersections of the city, in order to drown out the messages broadcast by the opposition. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, teams travelled up to Beijing, meeting with Chen Boda to complain that Ye Fei and the provincial party committee stood behind Tan Lifu's class theories to oppress the rebels.

A few days later, on 1 November, the rebels seized control of the party headquarters. Ken and his friends stormed Ye Fei's residence. The provincial leader, who was being served breakfast by two servants, turned pale as the Red Guards entered his dining room. He was paraded through the streets in the following days, and soon sent out an appeal for help to Han Xianchu, the local army commander. Han, a gaunt man with a maimed left hand fixed in the shape of a chicken claw, refused to intervene. By the end of the year, Ye had fallen from grace. Han took over as leader of the province.<sup>7</sup>

That very same day yet another editorial of the *Red Flag* appeared, this one entitled 'Victory for the Proletarian Revolutionary Line Represented by



Chairman Mao'. It dealt a fatal blow to Red Guard organisations branded as 'royalist' or 'conservative', and accused leading party members of 'treating the masses as if they were ignorant and incapable': 'They shift the targets of attack and direct their spearhead against the revolutionary masses, branding them "anti-party elements", "rightists", "pseudo-revolutionaries", "pseudo-leftists but genuine rightists" and so forth.'<sup>8</sup>

The result of the editorial was a rush to join rebel organisations, as few people wished to be seen as supporters of the 'bourgeois reactionary line'. But the ranks of the revolutionaries now went far beyond mere students, whether or not they were born red. People everywhere joined the Cultural Revolution, trying to better their lot. In Xi'an, Kang Zhengguo could feel 'their pent-up rage spilling out like water rolling over a dam'. Temporary factory workers demanded permanent jobs; youths who had been sent to the countryside wanted to return to the cities; laid-off government employees called for reinstatement. All of them blamed the 'bourgeois reactionary line'. 'Now that the leaders had been pronounced fair game, nobody was afraid to lash out at them any more.'<sup>9</sup>

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It looked like a people's revolution. Just as Mao had incited students to rebel against their teachers months earlier, he now unleashed ordinary people against their party leaders. In doing so he tapped into a deep pool of resentment. There seemed to be no end to the number of people who harboured grievances against party officials. Across the country the population was organised into self-contained work units under the thumb of local cadres, and in every unit there were those who became rebels – from farmers, workers, teachers and shop assistants to government clerks.

The country was a giant pressure cooker. Seventeen years earlier, when the communists had conquered the country, many ordinary people had accepted liberation with a mixture of fear, hope and resignation. There was widespread relief that the civil war had come to an end. The proclaimed values of the regime, including equality, justice and freedom, were genuinely appealing, and the party tirelessly trumpeted the New Democracy, a slogan promising the inclusion of all but the most hardened enemies of the regime. Above all, the communists promised each disaffected group what it wanted most: land for the farmers, independence for all minorities, freedom for intellectuals, protection of private property for businessmen, higher living standards for the workers.

One by one, these promises were broken, as a whole range of real or imagined opponents were eliminated with the unwitting help of the enemies of tomorrow, those who were cajoled into co-operating with the regime. By 1957, basic liberties had been curtailed, including the freedom of speech, the freedom of association, the freedom of movement and the freedom of domicile. Everything that stood between the state and the individual had been eliminated, as entire categories of people – from farmers and intellectuals to monks – had become state employees working in government units at the beck and call of local cadres. In the following years, Mao's Great Famine not only consumed tens of millions of people in the countryside, but also extinguished whatever hope most ordinary people had for a better future – with the exception of a small band of true believers.

In the years following the catastrophe, the party reasserted its control over the population through the Socialist Education Campaign. In the words of one political scientist, 'the state ruled society more thoroughly than during any other equivalent length of time'.<sup>10</sup>

In order to cope with the colossal economic losses of the Great Leap Forward, a ruthless policy of cutting labour costs was pursued, undermining the livelihoods of many urban residents. In 1955, in order to prevent large numbers of villagers from seeking shelter in the cities, Zhou Enlai had expanded the household registration system, used in the cities since 1951, to the countryside. Like the internal passport in the Soviet Union, it tied the distribution of food to the number of people registered in each household, effectively preventing villagers from moving around. But it also divided people into two separate worlds, classifying them as either 'city dwellers' (*jumin*) or 'peasants' (*nongmin*). Children inherited this status through their mother, meaning that even if a village girl married a man from the city, she and her children remained 'peasants'. People in the countryside were treated like an hereditary caste deprived of the privileges that the state granted most city dwellers, namely subsidised housing, food rations and access to health, education and disability benefits.<sup>11</sup>

After the famine, in order to reduce the burden on the state further, large numbers of urban residents were dispatched to the countryside, where they lost their status and all the associated benefits. This policy began in 1961 and 1962, when more than 20 million people were driven from the cities and left to their own devices in people's communes across the country.<sup>12</sup>

This was the opening of a deliberate effort to decrease the number of permanent workers entitled to state benefits. In Shanghai, Cao Diqu – the man who would become the beleaguered mayor of the city after Ke Qingshi's premature death in 1965 – ordered factories and enterprises to employ more temporary workers. People with secure jobs were relocated to remote villages, while farmers were recruited instead during the slack winter months. They were assigned to the most demeaning jobs at much lower pay than their permanent counterparts. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, approximately one-third of all workers nationwide were on temporary contracts thanks to state efforts to whittle away welfare expenditure.<sup>13</sup>

China, in short, was still mired in the catastrophe unleashed by the Great Leap Forward. Demands for improved working conditions, higher wages, better health care and increased benefits were common. Vast disparities existed between workers described in communist parlance as the 'proletariat'. At one end of the salary range there were union workers and technicians who received a range of benefits dating back to the early days of liberation. Some factories provided their workers with major amenities, including large dining halls, clinics, libraries, table-tennis facilities, lounges, schools for children and generous pensions of up to 70 per cent of wages on retirement. At the bottom of the scale there was a vast, dark underworld of impoverished workers on temporary contracts, hired and fired at will without any fringe benefits, some of them working on giant construction projects without any basic rights, living in crowded, insanitary dormitories. In between these two extremes many workers complained of poor housing, low wages, excessive discipline and the widespread use of overtime without compensation.<sup>14</sup>

Tensions further increased during the Cultural Revolution. In June and July 1966, workers had joined the students in writing big-character posters to denounce the 'monsters and demons' who, according to the official guidelines, had oppressed the working people. They needed little encouragement, and soon disgruntled employees took to task the local cadres who wielded so much power over their lives. In the Guangming Watch Factory in Shanghai, the party secretary found posters in every corridor accusing him of corruption and nepotism. In other factories too, some leaders were accused of being 'despotic emperors', and employees demanded that they step down. Some of the more militant protesters formed Combat Teams. They linked up with like-minded agitators in other factories, raided offices to dig up incriminating evidence against their leaders and accused the management of being 'royalists' who produced nothing but fake self-criticisms. On a single day in August, more than 400 factory cadres were paraded in dunce's caps through the streets of Shanghai.<sup>15</sup>

In Shanghai over a million workers participated in the Cultural Revolution over the summer.<sup>16</sup> But despite the outpouring of discontent, some work teams managed to deflect the brunt of the attack away from themselves on to ordinary workers. Across the country as a whole, work teams stigmatised many ordinary people as 'counter-revolutionaries' and 'rightists', leaving a permanent blot in their personal dossiers that would blight their careers.

When Mao called on 'the masses' to 'educate and liberate themselves' in October, he was seen as a liberator. The *Red Flag* editorial of 1 November lambasted 'royalist' leaders for branding the revolutionary masses as 'anti-party elements' and 'rightists'. It also demanded that the dossiers compiled

by work teams be destroyed and their verdicts overturned.<sup>17</sup>

Overnight the victims of the work teams were vindicated, as the world was turned upside down. It seemed that the misfortunes of those persecuted over the summer had come to an end. At first rebel Red Guards forced party committees in some schools to turn over all the dossiers and publicly dispose of them. Ordinary people soon tried to emulate them, storming party offices, rummaging through storage rooms, tracking down their personal dossiers and burning them in public.<sup>18</sup>

Before long, the victims of earlier campaigns started clamouring for justice. They included party members who had been punished or expelled from the ranks. They, too, demanded redress and joined the attack on the ‘bourgeois reactionary line’ of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Liu Shaoqi, after all, was the man responsible for a vicious purge of the party during the Socialist Education Campaign, when 5 million members had been punished. And Deng Xiaoping had overseen the anti-rightist campaign of 1957, when hundreds of thousands of people had been labelled as ‘rightists’ and deported to labour camps.

There was a long list of discontents, as ordinary people used their newly acquired freedoms to protest. Factories, both big and small, started printing their own bulletins and newspapers, relishing their newly found freedom of publication. Hundreds of associations were spontaneously established in Shanghai alone, as people were finally granted the right to assemble in the name of the ‘great proletarian democracy’. No longer requiring official permission to undertake a trip, people left their jobs in droves to make their way to the local party headquarters. In Shanghai, some 40,000 workers returned from the countryside to demonstrate their discontent. Some of them occupied Shanghai Mansions, a luxury art deco block of apartments opened in 1936 and reserved for the top leadership after 1949. Others staged a hunger strike in front of the Labour Bureau. Many joined the rebels laying siege to the municipal party committee.<sup>19</sup>

There was hardly a work unit where some form of rebel opposition did not appear. In some cases the revolution was limited to a few inflammatory posters, but elsewhere it developed into pitched battles between different factions. In most cases, the rebel workers faced deeply entrenched opposition. Factory leaders were well organised, attuned to political campaigns and tempered by years of revolutionary experience. Some of them were veterans of the Long March. They presided over a tightly controlled network of support, which ranged from the factory party committee, its political department and representatives of public security down to floor managers and workshop superintendents. There were party activists among the workers, as well as trade union members who stood firmly behind the old order. Temporary labourers, by definition, could be fired at any time, but even rank-and-file workers faced a range of retaliatory devices at the disposal of the party administration. They could be transferred to a different job, be moved to a factory far away in the countryside, have their benefits cut or be forced out of their subsidised housing. The rebels clamoured for justice in the name of proletarian democracy, but so did the factory leaders, who were savvy enough to join the campaign to denounce the ‘bourgeois reactionary line’. Everybody criticised Liu Shaoqi, while proclaiming loyalty to Chairman Mao. Everywhere the red flag went up. To show their commitment to the Cultural Revolution, the factory managers established their own mass organisations, lavishly funded, well organised and stacked with reliable followers. Workers were now fighting workers.<sup>20</sup>

Both factions appealed to Beijing. In Nanjing, where scuffles broke out across all sectors of industry, irate party officials phoned or petitioned the higher authorities in writing, complaining of counter-revolutionary plots and mounting economic losses as many factories were brought to a standstill. Rebel workers, in turn, sent delegations to protest against their party leaders. The scale of the unrest was enormous: from the Nanjing Machine Tool and Electrical Apparatus Factory alone, a third of its 185 workers made their way to the capital by the end of October to air their grievances.<sup>21</sup>

Many protesters converged on the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, a seven-storey building near Tiananmen Square. The place was soon teeming with representatives from all parts of the country. They complained about wage inequities, insecure employment, health hazards and lack of social and political rights. ‘They were a strangely quiet crowd, but their felt injustice hung menacingly over the city.’ On 26 December, as Mao Zedong turned seventy-three, representatives of a newly forged nationwide alliance of temporary workers met with Jiang Qing and other members of the Cultural Revolution Group in the Great Hall of the People. Jiang Qing applauded them: ‘Chairman Mao is backing you!’ She urged them to attack the contract system, which she saw as a capitalist system instituted by Liu Shaoqi and his cronies to cut state costs at the expense of the proletariat. She personally denounced the minister of labour. ‘Let him become a temporary worker!’ Yao Wenyuan quipped. A larger meeting followed at the Workers’ Stadium, as one enraged demonstrator after another appeared on stage to denounce exploitative working conditions, decrepit housing and a starvation diet. Many of them went on to camp in front of the Ministry of Labour.<sup>22</sup>

In her inflammatory speech at the Great Hall of the People, Jiang Qing ordered the Ministry of Labour to reinstate all workers, permanent and temporary, who had been fired since 1 June 1966 as a direct result of their criticism of enterprise leaders. Their salaries were to be paid retrospectively. Her decision was published the same day by the *People’s Daily*, along with an injunction further prohibiting local cadres from exacting any form of revenge against workers who participated in the Cultural Revolution. That evening, celebrating his birthday with members of the Cultural Revolution Group, the Chairman gave a toast: ‘To the unfolding of a nationwide civil war!’<sup>23</sup>

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Compared to the students, who had been catalysed into action over the summer, the entrance of the workers into the revolution was a much slower process, but one that would have equally far-reaching consequences. Nowhere was this more evident than in Shanghai, the base from which the Cultural Revolution had been launched a year earlier.

When Red Guards from Beijing had laid siege to the offices of Mayor Cao Diqu in early September, thousands of loyal workers had been mobilised to rebuff their demands. It appeared to be a stalemate, as neither side managed to gain the upper hand. But after the *Red Flag* editorial of 1 November, accusing leading party members of ‘directing their spearhead against the revolutionary masses’, rebel workers joined the fray. In the Shanghai Number Seventeen Cotton Textile Mill, where months earlier the work team had labelled Wang Hongwen a ‘self-seeking careerist’ for stirring up discontent among the factory’s workers, a rebel organisation was established. Wang took the lead: ‘What if the Public Security Bureau finds out, declares us counter-revolutionaries, and arrests us? Are you afraid or not? I’m not afraid! I’m determined to rebel!’<sup>24</sup>

A midnight raid was carried out on a fabric shop, where bolts of red cloth were commandeered to make armbands. On 9 November, the organisation popularly known as the Red Workers was formally inaugurated on Cultural Plaza, the former Canidrome in the French Concession where greyhound races had once been hosted. Mayor Cao Diqu spurned the event, referring to the rebel workers as the ‘dregs of humanity’. Right after the inaugural event, more than 20,000 workers marched to the city hall, demanding that their organisation be recognised. As the protesters waited for hours in the pouring winter rain, news of a telegram sent by Zhou Enlai did the rounds: ‘If the Shanghai Municipal Committee does not want to see you, come to Beijing. I will see you!’ It was a rumour, but it caused a rush to the railway station. Over a thousand workers forced their way on to an express train bound for Beijing, but the railway authorities shunted it off on to a siding some twenty minutes out of Shanghai. The rebels refused to get off the train. Some lay down on the tracks, holding red flags. When local officials organised hot water and buns for the passengers, some of the food was thrown out of the window: ‘We do not wish to eat this revisionist food!’

After transportation between Shanghai and Nanjing had been paralysed for thirty hours, the deadlock was finally broken by Zhang Chunqiao, the brooding man who as director of propaganda in the Shanghai party machine had helped Jiang Qing a year earlier. Now a member of the Cultural Revolution Group, he was sent by military plane to sort out the dispute, bringing with him a message from Chen Boda. Standing in the back of a lorry in the heavy rain, he addressed rebels through a loudspeaker, urging them to return to Shanghai.<sup>25</sup>

The rebels won the day, gaining official recognition from Beijing. A mass rally was held a few days later under the auspices of Zhang Chunqiao, comfortably ensconced in a suite of rooms at the Peace Hotel on the Bund.

The party machine now changed tack, organising their own force to keep the rebels in check. They were better funded and much larger in number than the Red Guards. By the middle of December, Shanghai looked like a city under siege, as massive battles were staged between hundreds of thousands of Red Workers and a million Scarlet Guards. One of the bloodiest clashes took place on Kangping Road on 30 December, as 100,000 rebels armed with iron pipes, clubs and bamboo poles launched an assault on 20,000 of their opponents guarding the municipal party committee. Wang Hongwen personally led the charge, which caused close to a hundred casualties. On Zhang Chunqiao's instructions, Scarlet Guard offices in factories around the city were ransacked, armbands were confiscated and several hundred leaders were rounded up.

In an attempt to whittle down support for the rebels, factory administrations started awarding special bonuses to outstanding workers, agreeing to wage increases, issuing travel vouchers and granting windfall bonuses. They turned the editorial of the *People's Daily* published on Mao's birthday to their own advantage, attempting to mollify the ranks of the opposition by acceding to some of their demands. There are no complete statistics, but according to one study some 38 million yuan were withdrawn from the banks, nearly twice the usual amount, in the first week of January 1967 alone. The amount of money sent in the direction of the rebels was such that a run on the banks followed, as people were afraid that they were going under. A shopping spree ensued, soon superseded by panic buying, as it was feared that shops would run out of daily necessities such as charcoal briquettes and cooking oil.<sup>26</sup>

Chaos extended into the countryside, as tens of thousands of villagers entered the city to join the rebels. In some fields around Shanghai, only the women and the elderly were left to till the fields. With blocked ports, paralysed railway stations and a workforce fighting the revolution, Shanghai was threatened by critical shortages. Although the city needed 3,500 tonnes of grain a day, by New Year's Eve there were not enough provisions to cover a week. Coal reserves could keep the city warm for no more than five days.<sup>27</sup>

The deadlock was broken on 3 January 1967, as a northern wind brought bitterly cold weather with sleet icing up the streets. Red Guards and rebel workers, wearing safety helmets and armed with iron bars, stormed two of the biggest newspapers, assuming control of the city's propaganda machine. Others took over the municipal television and radio stations. A few days later all the major thoroughfares into the city were barricaded. Wang Hongwen, leading tens of thousands of rebels at a mass rally, stormed the city hall, knocking over the two brass lions that flanked the building. A huge red flag was raised to deafening cheers from the crowd. Factory sirens hailed the proletarian victory. On 11 January Mao dealt a fatal blow to the old order by sending a congratulatory telegram to the Red Workers. The entire nation, he wrote, should learn from Shanghai and seize power from those who followed the 'bourgeois reactionary line'.<sup>28</sup>

To 'seize power' became the motto of the day. As the Chairman put it in an editorial published by the *People's Daily* on 22 January, praising what was now called the 'January Storm' in Shanghai: 'If you have power, you have everything. If you don't have power, you have nothing . . . Unite yourselves, form a great alliance and seize power! Seize power!! Seize power!!!'

## Enter the Army

The Chairman enjoined the masses to unite and seize power in order to sweep away the capitalist roaders who stood in the way of the proletarian revolution. But party leaders were deeply entrenched, adept at deflecting the opposition and able to harness mass organisations to their own advantage. In many cities across the country, rebels and royalists had fought each other to a stalemate. Meanwhile, the 'revolutionary masses' themselves were hardly united. Even in Shanghai the Red Workers were not a disciplined army at the beck and call of Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen, but a fragile alliance of rebel outfits with very different allegiances from a wide variety of backgrounds. The moment the red flag went up over the municipal party committee, different constituencies started jostling for power and fighting each other.

The Chairman applauded the January Storm, but it had come at great cost, wrecking the local economy as hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike or became caught up in protracted battles that lasted for months on end. The chances of a red tide quickly washing away all followers of the 'bourgeois reactionary line' in the rest of the country were remote.

There were other issues. Mao did not trust the security apparatus, built up over many years by Luo Ruiqing, who had been minister of public security for a decade before becoming chief of staff in 1959. The Chairman was determined to smash the police, prosecutors and courts, which were all infiltrated by class enemies. A first step towards this goal was the public humiliation of Luo. Unable to walk after his suicide bid months earlier, he was carried to the Workers' Stadium in a basket, his left leg in bandages. For two days, on 4 and 5 January 1967, one delegation of Red Guards after another appeared on stage to voice their hatred, raising the audience's fury to fever pitch. Photos of Luo, forced to assume the jet-plane position by two soldiers, were widely disseminated.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of relying on the police, tainted by their association with the old order, the State Council turned to soldiers to assume some of the more urgent tasks of law enforcement. Banks were under huge pressure, forced in some cases to remit funds to mass organisations, and on 11 January soldiers with machine guns started appearing on their premises. The following day, soldiers were ordered to take over public security at radio stations, prisons, wharves, granaries and key bridges across the country.<sup>2</sup>

In a separate development, an entire province joined the revolutionary camp a few weeks after the January Storm in Shanghai. But it was hardly a revolution from below. Liu Geping, deputy governor of Shanxi province and a close associate of Kang Sheng, was in Beijing when Wang Hongwen stormed the city hall in Shanghai. Kang urged him on, telling him that the Chairman supported the rebels and hoped to see a whole string of similar revolutions across the country. Liu hurried back to Taiyuan, Shanxi's provincial capital, and with the support of one of the provincial military commanders put up a big-character poster announcing a rebel seizure of power. They faced opposition from their colleagues, but on 20 January the commander wrote to ask Lin Biao for his support. A mere sign from the country's second-in-command tipped the balance of military power. On 25 January the *People's Daily* celebrated the country's second power seizure.<sup>3</sup>

A similar request for assistance reached the Cultural Revolution Group on 21 January. In Anhui province, some 200,000 rebels were about to denounce the provincial party committee at a mass meeting, but feared that without military support they would fail in their bid to seize power. Months earlier, on 5 September 1966, the armed forces had been expressly instructed to stay out of the Cultural Revolution. Now the Chairman scribbled a note to Lin Biao: 'The military must be sent to support the broad masses on the left.' The army, Mao believed, had been asked not to intervene in the earlier stages of the Cultural Revolution, but this neutral attitude was 'fake'. Lin Biao agreed. Two days later, on 23 January, the army was ordered to send troops wherever the proletarian left asked for help.<sup>4</sup>

Before joining the Cultural Revolution, the army managed to wrangle major concessions out of the Chairman. Some military chieftains had become victims of the Red Guards, and there was widespread revulsion at the way in which several of them had been humiliated for hours on end in struggle meetings, beaten and forced to adopt the jet-plane position. In December 1966, Peng Dehuai, the marshal who had confronted the Chairman over the famine at the Lushan plenum in 1959, was hunted down in Sichuan and brought back to Beijing by a team of Red Guards acting on Jiang Qing's orders. Peng's ordeal was predictable. Like Luo Ruiqing, he was dragged out of prison to face interminable struggle meetings. One bystander remembers seeing him in an open lorry, surrounded by Red Guards. He was attempting to keep his head defiantly high, but a puny student kept on hitting him on the neck, trying to force him to bow in submission. 'I watched with horror. Here was a man who had fought all his life for the revolution, a man whom everyone in China knew, almost as a legend. If even he had no protection in this anarchy, then what of us ordinary people? I felt myself choking and I wanted to cry.'<sup>5</sup>

What also sent ripples through the military ranks was the treatment of He Long, a flamboyant, legendary marshal whose signature in the early guerrilla days had been a butcher's knife. He was senior to Lin Biao, and enjoyed widespread support in the army. In December dozens of Red Guards tried to track him down, although Zhou Enlai managed to shelter him in his personal residence.<sup>6</sup>

Several other marshals, including Xu Xiangqian and Ye Jianying, joined together and demanded that order, first of all, be restored within the military. Lin Biao, keen to protect his own power base in the military, acceded to these demands, submitting a document to the Chairman drafted in consultation with the army veterans. In essence, it shielded the army from assaults by rebel groups. The document contained a further trump card, granting the army the right to take 'resolute measures' against proven counter-revolutionaries and counter-revolutionary organisations.<sup>7</sup>

Mao had little choice. Neither the Red Guards nor the rebels had so far been able to unseat the 'capitalist roaders inside the party ranks'. The army was the only force capable of pushing through the revolution and bringing the situation under control. But by allowing the armed forces to decide who constituted the 'true proletarian left', the Chairman opened Pandora's box.

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Less than a week after rebel workers had stormed the Shanghai Radio Station, the army took over. It was not welcome, but there was very little a loose aggregation of rebel groups could do. More restrictions followed. On 22 January all parks were closed by revolutionary decree to forestall their potential use by counter-revolutionaries. Cinemas were shut. The museum closed. The Great World, an amusement arcade renamed East is Red, was locked. People were still allowed to walk along Nanjing Road, but on 24 January more than a dozen lorries trundled down the main high street loaded with soldiers who chanted slogans and waved the Little Red Book. Three days later pamphlets were airdropped over the city, explaining that the People's Liberation Army was the most important tool of the Cultural Revolution and all genuine revolutionaries should support it.<sup>8</sup>

Zhang Chunqiao, with full backing from the Cultural Revolution Group, started eliminating his erstwhile allies, who were now contenders for power. He stressed discipline and obedience, reading out instructions from Lin Biao. Raids were launched against former supporters. A detachment of soldiers



was sent to Fudan University to occupy the offices of a rival organisation. A raft of directives ordered people from revolutionary organisations to return to work. On 29 January the Cultural Revolution Group sent a telegram in support of Zhang, accusing some rebel leaders of having ‘turned the spearhead of struggle’ against him.<sup>9</sup>

Zhang Chunqiao’s day came on 5 February, as a large rally was organised in People’s Square to establish the new ‘Shanghai People’s Commune’. The name echoed the Paris Commune, a revolutionary government that briefly ruled France’s capital in 1871 after the country’s defeat by Germany. The commune loomed large in the socialist imagination, and was celebrated by Marx as a model of participatory democracy. Mao himself was an admirer of the Paris Commune. It was a bright Sunday afternoon, warm and cloudless, and thousands of scarlet, yellow and green banners went up. Small balloons with pennants were fired in canisters from several mortars. Those who watched the balloons float off could not fail to notice heavily armed troops on top of a number of buildings overlooking the square.<sup>10</sup>

‘We have the mighty People’s Liberation Army standing on our side,’ Zhang declared, flanked by Yao Wenyuan. His first decree was to order the army and the police to ‘resolutely suppress active counter-revolutionaries who undermine the Great Cultural Revolution, the Shanghai People’s Commune and the socialist economy’. Half of the rebels stood defiantly outside, excluded from the inauguration.<sup>11</sup>

Zhang was jubilant. But just as Zhang did not want to share power with other rebels, the Chairman was not about to delegate the city to him. There was no congratulatory telegram from Beijing. A few weeks later, the Chairman reflected: ‘If every province, city and region were called a people’s commune, we would have to change the name of our country from People’s Republic of China to People’s Commune of China . . . Then what about the party? Where would we place the party? Where would we place the party committee? There must be a party somehow! There must be a nucleus, no matter what we call it.’<sup>12</sup>

In the early hours of 25 February the Shanghai People’s Commune quietly changed its name to the Shanghai Municipal Revolutionary Committee. Cleaners had been busy all night, and by morning the word ‘Commune’ had almost completely disappeared. ‘Revolutionary committees’ were the new fad, and they would spread in the following eighteen months. They were supposed to be a show of unity between three major groups, namely rebel representatives, loyal party cadres and army officers. In reality they were dominated by the army.<sup>13</sup>

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In many parts of the country, the army attempted to impose order. Few military leaders were impressed by the rebels, who responded to the call to ‘seize power’ by storming government premises, ransacking party offices and taking over newspapers and radio stations. Government officials denounced by the rebels had colleagues and friends in the military, and many of them were veteran revolutionaries devoted to the party. In the eyes of most army commanders, rebel organisations were dominated by individuals from dubious class backgrounds, the very people they had fought against in the revolution before 1949. They suspected that many of them were controlled by counter-revolutionaries, who used the Cultural Revolution as a pretext to attack the party and vent their resentment against socialism.

Violent clashes occurred in several provinces. In Shihezi, a major transportation hub in Xinjiang, the Muslim-dominated province where the country’s first atomic test had been carried out in October 1964, the military sided with the old order in a concerted assault on rebel organisations, portrayed as remnants of the nationalist party and bad elements. By the end of January 1967, dozens of people had been mown down by machine guns.<sup>14</sup>

In Changsha in August 1966, tens of thousands of protesters had been branded as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘rightists’ after the mayor had used Red Guards to fight Red Guards. Since the Cultural Revolution stipulated that students could not be targeted, the bulk of the victims at the time were ordinary people. One rebel group, which named itself after the river that flows through the province, agitated on their behalf. The Xiang River Group gained an astonishing following all over Hunan, claiming a membership of 1 million by early 1967. It was a loose coalition, acting as an umbrella for a variety of smaller organisations that had mushroomed after Mao had called on the masses to ‘educate and liberate themselves’ in October. People flocked to join their ranks – workers, teachers, shop assistants, even government employees and local cadres who saw a change in the wind.

Energised by the January Storm in Shanghai, the Xiang River Group tried to seize power in Changsha. But unlike the Red Workers in Shanghai, it did not have a powerful backer in Beijing. When a group of disgruntled veterans affiliated with the Xiang River Group assaulted a local command post, they alienated the military, who portrayed the incident as an armed uprising of counter-revolutionary elements abetted by ex-convicts. Chen Boda personally ordered a crackdown. Martial law was proclaimed. A massive manhunt was organised by the army, as tens of thousands of students, teachers, workers and army veterans were hunted down. Schools and factories were converted into prisons. In a scenario that would become all too familiar, a rival rebel group actively assisted the army in hunting down their competitors for power.<sup>15</sup>

In Fujian, where the military commander Han Xianchu had taken over from Ye Fei, the rebels were in close touch with the military, regularly visiting the headquarters to play ping-pong and basketball or watch propaganda movies. But here, too, a split occurred, as some mass organisations denounced the military command as adherents of the ‘reactionary bourgeois line’. They demanded that Han step down. Rumours started circulating, claiming that Chen Boda was secretly encouraging the rebels to attack Han Xianchu.

Further south in the province, after the call to seize power Ken Ling and the rebels succeeded in beating the municipal party committee and its defenders. They established the Xiamen People’s Commune, taking their lead from Shanghai. Within days, entire sections of the local government fell in line, handing over power to the rebels. The royalists had the backing of the local police, and soon both camps were fighting each other over control of the three-storey Public Security Bureau. Rebel workers lent a hand, storming the compound and attacking the police, ripping off their badges and knocking off their caps. Uninvited, powerful local gangs joined the fray. They loathed the police more than anyone else, and they had excellent fighting skills. More than a hundred people were injured. Local people rejoiced, some of them rushing to help, bringing baskets of oranges and lining the streets to cheer the rebels.

It was a strategic mistake, as Han Xianchu and the provincial military command condemned the attack. The military in Xiamen intervened, ordering the rebels to surrender. Hundreds of people were arrested and tried in public on the square before the Workers’ Palace of Culture, where the rebels had established their headquarters. Ken Ling was on a blacklist and fled the province.<sup>16</sup>

The worst confrontation took place in Qinghai, the barren province to the east of Xinjiang, dominated by steppe and desert. After weeks of skirmishes between rebels and royalists, the deputy commander of the military sent his troops on 23 February to quell an organisation that had seized control of the main newspaper. At first all the loudspeakers attached to the office block housing the newspaper were shot down. A barrage of gunfire followed, killing all those who defended the entrance to the building. The army had prepared several flamethrowers, but these turned out to be unnecessary as the rebels were unarmed. All resistance crumbled. The army took less than twenty minutes to storm the premises. More than a hundred people were killed in the assault, including a seven-year-old girl crying by the side of her injured father. The bodies were hastily buried in a mass grave. When the deputy commander telegraphed his report to Ye Jianying in Beijing, the marshal complimented him. Lin Biao and Mao Zedong, eager to protect the army, did not intervene. In the following week some 10,000 people were arrested, many of them tried as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and sent off to the gulag. As one historian of the Cultural Revolution has observed, the crackdown was more violent than any of the killings perpetrated by warlords or foreign powers



during the republican era.<sup>17</sup>

Rebels were also condemned as ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and violently suppressed by the army in other provinces, such as Hubei, Guangdong, Sichuan and Inner Mongolia. Xu Xiangqian and Ye Jianying, the army veterans who had managed to have the army officially shielded from assaults by rebel groups in late January, were in the ascendant. In mid-February they identified a further opportunity to consolidate their power against the Cultural Revolution Group.

Mao, by late January, was increasingly annoyed with the group headquartered at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. Its members were squabbling among themselves. Kang Sheng and Chen Boda could not stand each other. Jiang Qing had an imperious style and tended to overshadow her colleagues. Despite massive logistical support, the group seemed disorganised and tended to take matters into its own hands without sending regular reports to the Chairman. Zhang Chunqiao, for one, had gone out on a limb by inaugurating the Shanghai People’s Commune without any form of consultation.

The irritated Chairman, in a meeting he summoned on 10 February, thought it time to bring the group down a peg or two. He accused its members of political inexperience and told them that they were arrogant. He termed Chen Boda an ‘opportunist’ who in the past had tried to exploit the divide between himself and Liu Shaoqi. Mao turned on his own wife: ‘As for you, Jiang Qing, you have great aspirations but not an ounce of talent, and you look down on everyone else.’ It was a bruising encounter. ‘It looks to me like it’s still the same as it was before. You don’t report to me, you block me out!’<sup>18</sup>

When the army leaders learned of this outburst, they sensed an opportunity to reverse the course of the Cultural Revolution. At a meeting of the central leadership the following day, Ye Jianying laid into Chen Boda, who was still shaken from the Chairman’s accusation. ‘You have made a mess of the government, a mess of the party, a mess of the factories and the countryside! And still you think it’s not enough, you are determined to make a mess of the army as well!’ Xu Xiangqian banged the table and mentioned the rebel leader from Tsinghua University: ‘What do you want? For people like Kuai Dafu to lead the army?’

Five days later, at a second session, the marshals went further. Tan Zhenlin, who had been the Chairman’s most faithful agricultural aide during the Great Leap Forward, was scathing when Zhang Chunqiao mentioned the masses: ‘What masses? Always the masses, the masses. There is still the leadership of the party! You don’t want the party’s leadership, and all day long you keep on talking about how the masses should liberate themselves, educate themselves and free themselves. What is all this stuff? It’s all metaphysics!’ He flew into a rage: ‘Your aim is to purge the old cadres. You are knocking them down one by one, until there is not a single one of them left.’

The most inflammatory comments came from Chen Yi, the feisty and outspoken minister for foreign affairs who had conquered Shanghai in 1949. He pointed out that during the Yan’an days in the Second World War, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Peng Zhen had professed to be the most enthusiastic supporters of Mao Zedong Thought while he and the other military veterans around the table had been taken to task. Khrushchev, too, had embraced Stalin when he was still alive.

As the brawl between the two groups developed, Zhou Enlai said very little, making sure that he could not be implicated in any of the more extreme comments made by the marshals. When Tan Zhenlin was about to storm out of the session, Zhou pounded the table, demanding that he return to the meeting.<sup>19</sup>

The outburst was nothing less than a collective assault by military leaders on the Cultural Revolution. It was a turning point, one in which the very fate of the Chairman’s vision was at stake. Never before had such a powerful group directly attacked a campaign initiated by Mao himself. If the marshals prevailed, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping could soon make a comeback, exacting revenge for all the humiliation they had endured and wrecking the reputation of the Chairman.

Mao considered his position carefully and realised that he needed to gain the support of two people to outmanoeuvre the opposition. Lin Biao was easily won over. Mao quoted Chen Yi’s comments about how Khrushchev had been Stalin’s most faithful follower, which could be interpreted as a direct swipe at Lin’s position as heir apparent. Chen Yi’s attitude indicated that Lin did not have widespread support in the higher echelons of power. Mao further cemented his relationship with Lin by reaching out to his wife, asking Ye Qun to join the Cultural Revolution Group.

But the key was Zhou Enlai. He could have tilted the balance of power towards the marshals by rallying to their cause. But the premier had made his career by vowing never to antagonise the Chairman. He had not intervened to restrain the meeting, but he had also tactically withheld any explicit support. Mao ordered the Cultural Revolution Group to stop circulating any document critical of the premier.<sup>20</sup>

Having secured the support of the two most important players behind the scenes, the Chairman summoned a meeting in the early hours of 19 February with leading members of the party. In a vituperative encounter, he bullied the marshals into submission. He ranted at length, declaring that the meetings at which the military leaders had attacked the Cultural Revolution Group were targeted at him personally and at Lin Biao. As Lin Biao was absent from the meeting, he warned his wife: ‘Comrade Ye Qun, you tell Lin Biao that he is not safe either. Some people are trying to seize his power and he should be prepared!’ Mao vowed to oppose anyone who undermined the Cultural Revolution Group, which had made errors amounting to ‘no more than two or three per cent’ when compared to their achievements. In an echo of the bombastic threats he had made at the Lushan plenum in 1959, Mao vowed to take to the mountains and start a guerrilla war together with Lin Biao. ‘You say that Jiang Qing and Chen Boda are no good. Well, let Chen Yi become the head of the Cultural Revolution Group! Arrest and execute Chen Boda and Jiang Qing, send Kang Sheng into exile. I, too, will step down!’ Everyone present was stunned. Kang Sheng later confided that he had never seen the Chairman so angry. ‘He was in a proletarian rage.’<sup>21</sup>

Struggle meetings against Tan Zhenlin, Chen Yi and Xu Xiangqian followed, all of them chaired by Zhou Enlai, in the very room in Zhongnanhai where they had led the attack on the Cultural Revolution Group and where they had been granted their military titles years earlier. All opposition collapsed. The standing committee of the powerful Politburo, which for years had dominated the party, became paralysed. The Cultural Revolution Group now ran the show. Zhou had to obey Madame Mao. ‘From now on you make all the decisions,’ he grovelled, ‘and I will make sure that they are carried out.’<sup>22</sup>

On 8 March, Marshal Ye Jianying invited the deputy commander of Qinghai who had used troops to put down rebels to Beijing. The People’s Liberation Army had its own venue where the military elite could meet behind closed doors to hammer out important deals, namely a Soviet-style hotel in the west of Beijing. In the Capital West Hotel, built in 1964, the deputy commander was fêted as a model in crushing counter-revolutionary insurgencies. For three days, he proudly explained his pacification methods to military leaders from other regions, who were keen to learn how to contain the rebels. But Mao, who had gone along with the suppression of rebels in Qinghai for several weeks, now intervened. Ye Jianying and Xu Xiangqian were forced to write their own self-criticisms, accepting that their handling of the situation in Qinghai had been a serious error. The deputy commander and his allies were thrown into prison. The rebels in Qinghai were hailed as martyrs.<sup>23</sup>

But the role of the army did not diminish. On 19 March, the Military Affairs Commission, now firmly in the hands of Lin Biao, asked the army to exert control, taking over the running of government units from schools and factories up to huge administrative entities such as ministries and entire provinces. Over the following months some 2.8 million soldiers left their barracks to occupy key positions across the country, closely shadowing the party and state structures. A few days later, Kang Sheng explained what military control meant: 'Military control is autocratic rule. You obey me in everything. You put out a public notice in which you announce that you obey me.'<sup>24</sup>

The military team that arrived at Zhai Zhenhua's school in March did not bother to hold a meeting with the Red Guards. They simply gathered the students and announced that the Red Guards had helped the work teams in pushing the bourgeois reactionary line. They had persecuted students from bad class backgrounds instead of directing their fire at capitalist roaders. The students were asked to rise up against them, as the Red Guards were forced to confess their errors in class. From revolutionary leader, Zhai became a revolutionary target overnight. A new group of student leaders emerged, supervised by a platoon leader. Zhai was cast aside.<sup>25</sup>

In Zhengding, thirty-six soldiers with backpacks marched into Gao Yuan's school. For the first time since September, the students actually sat together in the same room, exchanging stories about their adventures travelling around the country. The officer in charge brought a sense of order to the class, making sure that the students were roused before dawn, compelling them to practise drill formations on the sports field each day. Much time was spent studying Mao Zedong Thought.<sup>26</sup>

It seemed as if the revolution was coming to an end. The students who had run amok were all back in class, subjected to a regime of strict military discipline. Workers were back at their posts. Rebels who had been caught on the wrong side of the political divide were asked to return to the Chairman's 'proletarian revolutionary line' after making a self-criticism. Unity was praised, as the propaganda machine trumpeted a great alliance between the military, the revolutionary cadres and mass organisations that would surge ahead and sweep away all factional differences. In the capital, posters and slogans were removed from buses, and shop windows were scraped clean. It was springtime, and a few young couples even dared to walk hand in hand. People sat outside in the sun on their doorsteps, a few playing badminton in the side-streets.<sup>27</sup>

It was a fragile truce. Even in Shanghai, firmly under the thumb of Zhang Chunqiao, getting students back to class after half a year of mayhem was a challenge. There was the sheer extent of the damage inflicted on school buildings. Less than half of them had managed to avoid major destruction, and one in five had to be completely written off. Many had broken doors, shattered windows and damaged roofs, not to mention the tables, chairs and blackboards that had been smashed up. Even where classes were resumed, education was intermittent. A few opened their doors for only two or three hours a week. Some of the students did not turn up. In the Ningbo Road Primary School and the Nanjing East Road Primary School, schoolchildren had formed gangs with names like 'Tokyo' or 'Field Army', roaming the neighbourhood in search of public property to vandalise. They stole light bulbs, telephones, microphones and bicycles from their own schools, as well as locks, windowpanes and cables. A few smoked and gambled. They beat people up, sometimes for a fee (the going rate in March 1967 was 10 yuan per victim). Fear reigned among the teachers, who continued to be spat at by some of the more rebellious students. Excrement was thrown at them from the upper floors.<sup>28</sup>

The peace did not last. The Chairman had sought to dampen down the revolutionary fires, forcing the different rebel factions across the country to unite under the single command of the army. But he did not want to extinguish the revolution.

In April he shifted the balance of power towards the rebels. First, a new directive introduced limits on the power of the military to stigmatise people as counter-revolutionaries and arrest them arbitrarily. Victims who had been arrested for having stormed military district commands were to be rehabilitated. This had already happened in Qinghai. Now the Cultural Revolution Group wanted to rescue other rebels from the hands of the military. In Sichuan, where the People's Liberation Army had arrested over 100,000 people after rebels had besieged the military command in Chengdu for a full week in February, some 28,000 victims were released from prison.<sup>29</sup>

The *People's Daily* began praising the 'revolutionary young generals', telling them that they had been following the correct line all along and should resolutely fight against the forces of revisionism. But the most important command came from the Military Affairs Commission under Lin Biao. On 6 April it prohibited the army from firing on rebels, disbanding mass organisations or retaliating against those who raided military commands.<sup>30</sup>

These documents were widely copied, circulated and posted. The situation was reversed within days. Rebel organisations that had been disbanded by the army were revived. People who had been labelled 'rightist' or 'bad elements' became hopeful. Students took to the streets again, shouting 'To Rebel is No Crime!' In some schools they were given armbands and paraded the streets. Other rebels followed, including workers and government employees. Rumours circulated that army commanders openly shielded capitalist roaders and colluded with them to establish independent kingdoms. The rebels were needed once again. Many of them were jubilant, embracing the Chairman as their saviour and supreme commander.<sup>31</sup>

A day after the army had been prohibited from using violence against rebels, the *Beijing Daily* opened fire on Liu Shaoqi, who had been under house arrest since his fall from grace in August 1966. On 10 April, Kuai Dafu, acting on detailed instructions from Jiang Qing and Zhou Enlai, assembled a crowd of 300,000 at Tsinghua University to humiliate Wang Guangmei, the 'stinking wife of China's Khrushchev'. A number of female Red Guards forced her to put on a tight-fitting dress with a high neck and slit skirt as well as high-heeled shoes. It was the attire in which she had appeared in Indonesia during a goodwill mission in 1963. A necklace made of ping-pong balls further mocked the pearl jewellery she had worn to make herself 'a whore with Sukarno'. She shivered as she was being pushed around on the stage, tripping in her shoes, her hair tousled. The audience went wild, as people tried to climb on each other's shoulders for a better view. Posters appeared the next day, accompanied by caricatures of Wang tottering on the stage in her improvised dress and fake necklace.<sup>32</sup>

The propaganda machine spewed out rants against the former head of state. The campaign was intended to unify the rebel organisations and help direct their fire at Liu and his agents in the party machine. In Zhengding, students were given copies of an article from the party journal *Red Flag* that criticised Liu Shaoqi. Gao Yuan and his schoolmates began to write posters attacking the officially designated target. 'It was a fine show of unity against a common enemy.'<sup>33</sup>

But the alliance was too frail to last. Instead of following the cues from Beijing, victims in many parts of the country sought retaliation against their erstwhile oppressors. Many of them had spent weeks in crowded, insanitary prisons, where they had been humiliated, beaten and forced to confess. They had been fed a starvation diet. They wanted revenge. They attacked rival factions and turned against the military, whose hands were now tied. This was true not only for provinces where the army had sided with the old order. In Shanxi, where Kang Sheng and his puppet Liu Geping had engineered a rebel coup from above, many of those persecuted as 'capitalist roaders' were spoiling for a fight. The result was a new tide of violence.<sup>34</sup>

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Riots against the army broke out across the country, as rebels demanded that the military release their comrades still in custody, rehabilitate those labelled as 'counter-revolutionaries' and apologise for the suppression of mass organisations. The Cultural Revolution entered a new phase, as students, workers and government employees split into two factions, those who relied on the army and those who opposed it. Both sides claimed to represent the

true revolution, although often they were hard to tell apart.

The situation on the ground was further complicated by the fact that the army itself was divided. At the very top, a line ran between Lin Biao and his supporters on the one hand and the veteran marshals on the other. The heir apparent had scored a huge victory when the Chairman had crushed the marshals in late February. It almost looked like a coup within a revolution, as Lin's followers benefited from the fallout inside the army. But Mao was wary of his second-in-command, and made an attempt at reconciliation with the marshals in April. They, too, should be part of his grand plan for unity, the Chairman told the old soldiers. He promised that they could make an appearance on the rostrum in Tiananmen Square for the annual parade on May Day.<sup>35</sup>

As different mass organisations embraced different army units in each province, the daily battles between factions began turning some cities into battlegrounds. In Xiamen, Ken and his faction came out of hiding and sided with an anti-aircraft artillery regiment sent by the Fuzhou Military Region. Their opponents embraced the Thirty-First Army Corps and the local military command instead. Each faction reinforced the buildings under their control with barbed wire. There was round-the-clock surveillance, as raids against each other were staged at night. The weapons now included knives, clubs, javelins and crude spears improvised by tying scissors to the end of a wooden pole. Lime, sulphuric acid and pesticide were also used, spread through fire hoses. The combatants routinely wore rattan and metal helmets, stolen from the fire brigade. Special training grounds were set up to practise scaling walls and crawling through barbed-wire fences. There were planning rooms to pore over military strategy, often with the help of military advisers or retired security personnel. There were departments for external affairs, finances, transportation and security, as each faction started shadowing the state in its attempt to rule the city.

At first, both factions clashed without any direct involvement of the military. But many rebels were keen to avenge their previous persecution, and soon there were direct assaults on the army. Ken and a thousand students from his Eighth Middle School raided the offices of the local military command, smashing the dishes and bowls of the soldiers who were eating lunch. They seized protective gear and seven vehicles. Restrained by standing orders forbidding them to open fire, the soldiers did not intervene.

Word went around that Jiang Qing and Chen Boda supported the rebels. The skirmishes increasingly polarised the city, as members of each faction did the rounds, inciting people to cut electricity wires, poison the water supply or otherwise harass neighbours who supported the opposition. Entire suburbs became no-go zones for people on the wrong side of the divide.<sup>36</sup>

A similar scenario unfolded in other parts of the country. In Zhengding too, the conflict moved beyond the school walls, as entire organisations and work units began to align themselves with one faction or another. Gao Yuan's faction was supported by a missile-engineering institute directly under the command of the General Staff Headquarters in Beijing. Their opponents were backed by the local military command in Shijiazhuang, an austere, modern railway hub just south of Zhengding where factories had shot up with Soviet assistance in the 1950s. Gao Yuan, like Ken Ling in Xiamen, became deeply involved in urban guerrilla warfare, as buildings were seized, enemy leaders kidnapped and prisoners exchanged. Skirmishes took place at night around strategic strongholds, often against invisible enemies, as the sound of muffled running and occasionally the crash of shattering glass punctuated the silence. Every casualty only increased the blood debt, contributing to a cycle of revenge and renewed violence.

By mid-July, the opposition had been forced to retreat to a building controlled by the Public Security Bureau. Gao and his friends set up giant catapults to shoot bricks into the compound, while loudspeakers on rooftops blared out propaganda. They had their own arsenal, where weapons were forged from high-carbon steel with the help of a blacksmith. A few students also made body armour from steel plate. As they prepared for the final assault, a figure holding a red flag emblazoned with her organisation's name appeared at a window on the third floor in the enemy camp. It was a schoolmate of Gao, but she was on the wrong team. 'I would rather die than surrender to you,' she screamed, before throwing herself from the windowsill. The red flag unfurled as she shouted 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' 'Her body lay perfectly still, enfolded in the flag.' A white flag was soon raised inside the compound, as all resistance crumbled.<sup>37</sup>

Even more ferocious battles took place in provincial capitals. In Sichuan, the lines were drawn between Li Jingquan and a couple popularly referred to as the two Tings. Li was a radical leader who had enthused about collectivisation, exclaiming at one point that 'Even shit has to be collectivised!' He had been one of Mao's most faithful supporters during the Great Leap Forward. After he had been presented with a report from the provincial security bureau claiming that some 8 million people had starved to death in Sichuan between 1958 and 1961, he compared the Great Leap Forward to the Long March, in which only one in ten soldiers had made it to the end: 'We are not weak, we are stronger, we have kept the backbone.'<sup>38</sup>

But Li Jingquan had allied himself with Liu Shaoqi during the Socialist Education Campaign. It was he who had presided over the demise of the entire leadership in neighbouring Guizhou province in 1964. The Chairman sided instead with Zhang Xiting and her husband Liu Jieting. Both had worked in an army unit that had participated in the invasion of Tibet in 1950, and were later posted in Yibin, a wealthy port city surrounded by bamboo forests along the Yangtze in southern Sichuan. They used their positions to engage in endless persecutions and political vendettas, and caused widespread starvation across the county. Critics of the famine were silenced. Their abuse of power was such that they were expelled from the party in 1965. But they appealed to a close friend in Beijing, namely Chen Boda. He introduced them to Jiang Qing, who recognised them as kindred spirits. The two Tings were rehabilitated in March 1967 and empowered to organise a Sichuan Revolutionary Committee.<sup>39</sup>

In April and May, hundreds of people were wounded in fierce battles between the two factions in Chengdu. Jung Chang saw processions of tens of thousands of rebels carrying the bloody corpses of people killed in the confrontations. Her own father, who had incurred the wrath of the two Tings, was arrested, denounced and paraded through the streets. Fighting was more vicious than elsewhere because the city was a centre for the arms industry. Some of the workers used hand grenades, automatic rifles, mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

This was true at the Sichuan Cotton Mill. Li Zhengan, whose eleven-year-old daughter had been made to clean the bedding for Red Guards, was asked to join the dominant faction in the mill or have her already meagre salary slashed even further. In the morning she washed clothes; in the afternoon she pulled bodies from the rubble. Ambulances ferried the injured to the hospital.<sup>40</sup>

The Cultural Revolution Group tried to impose its will on the provinces, but its mandate was limited. Even after Li Jingquan had been dismissed, the fighting continued. Much as Liu Shaoqi had installed his followers in the upper echelons, Li Jingquan had placed his people in key position of power. The two Tings were frail, even with Mao's backing. In Yibin, there was brutal fighting with guns, hand grenades, mortars and machine guns, dividing the army even further.

No one wanted to give up. Those on both sides were fuelled by mutual hatred, but also by the belief that they, rather than the opposition, were faithful followers of the Chairman. Most of all, the rebels and the royalists were fighting for their own political survival. They were defending their past choices. Many of the students, workers and cadres involved in the Cultural Revolution had been forced to make rapid choices in extraordinarily confused circumstances. The situation changed constantly, with bewildering reversals in fortune dictated by the whimsical policies emanating from Beijing. People drifted towards different sides of the divide, ending up fighting their own friends, colleagues and even family members. And all of them realised that if they were exposed, the victors would brand them as 'rightists' and 'counter-revolutionaries'. At best they would be driven out of their work units and lose all their benefits, forced to eke out a living on the margins of society. At worst they would be sent to the gulag. They were fighting

for their own survival. As one historian of the Red Guards has observed, they were trapped in a cycle of violence and the prospect of losing had become unthinkable.<sup>41</sup>



## The Arms Race

By June 1967 China was in chaos. From Dalian in the north to Guangzhou in the south, many freight workers and longshoremen no longer turned up in the country's main ports. Each day, an average of 138 ships had to be berthed and unloaded, but more than half had to wait at anchorage for a month. In Manchuria, the industrial powerhouse of the country, scores of factories relying on shipping stopped production. In Shanghai, the revolutionary committee was forced to turn schools, temples and other public spaces into makeshift storage rooms, as hundreds of lorries tried to clear 400,000 tonnes of abandoned freight. In Chongqing, the army had to intervene, tackling the backlog in the inland port.<sup>1</sup>

Trains were congested. Even though free travel for Red Guards had been abolished more than half a year earlier, streams of rebel delegations went to the capital, seeking redress or petitioning the party. Rows of people wrapped in their quilts could be seen sleeping outside the huge, brass-studded gates of the State Council, waiting to see Zhou Enlai. But, most of all, factional fighting paralysed entire trunks of the railway system. Hardly a day went by without some section of the national network falling victim to one mass organisation or another. On 16 May, over a hundred rival Red Guards fought each other while trying to board a freight train in Shanghai, forcing all traffic to a standstill for many hours. The following day a different group of rebels blocked a train bound for Hangzhou. Across the city, there were 'railway guerrilla troops' who specialised in breaking windows, assaulting passengers and beating up conductors.<sup>2</sup>

Crime was rampant, even by the standards of the time, when beating a 'capitalist' or raiding the home of a 'revisionist' was deemed a revolutionary act. In Shanghai, petty thieves could be found near markets, wharves, stations, shops and parks. In May 1967 the police arrested six times as many pickpockets at the North Railway Station as a year before. Robberies were on the increase, with most of the culprits young people, many of whom had acquired a taste for crime during the glorious days of red August.<sup>3</sup>

Mob justice took over, as a few cases reported from Shanghai illustrate. On 28 May 1967, an apprentice was beaten to death by a crowd, allegedly for having 'humiliated' a girl. The following day, rebels arrived at the house of Zhao Ada, knocked down his door, took him, his son and his daughter into custody and beat them up for being 'hoodlums'. Zhao, an ordinary factory worker, died of his injuries. Later that week, a recently released prisoner who approached a woman on the Bund was beaten to death by Red Guards, who were cheered on by a crowd of onlookers. On 11 June, a mob killed a man accused by his second wife of having abused her six-year-old daughter. People started using the Cultural Revolution to right personal wrongs, exact retribution for past injustices or set up vigilante teams to impose their own version of justice.<sup>4</sup>

The revolutionary upsurge, meanwhile, was apparently heading nowhere. Instead of leading to unity between rebels, revolutionary cadres and the army, the movement was splintering further, producing ever more hostility and outright violence. Rather than support the revolutionary left in a final push for victory, the army was trying to fend off constant attacks by mass organisations suppressed by the military in the past. Most of all, since February only one new area had been liberated from the clutches of the reactionary bourgeois line, namely Beijing. A revolutionary committee was inaugurated with much fanfare in April, welcoming among others Nie Yuanzi, the author of the first big-character poster in Peking University in May 1966.

The revolution was failing to proceed according to plan. But since the Chairman was infallible, failure could only be the result of faulty execution. Some among the central leadership favoured a return to order, others advocated a more militant approach. Even before these tensions were resolved, events in Wuhan changed the parameters of the revolution, ushering in an arms race that would lead to a whole new level of violence.

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Wuhan, along with Nanjing and Chongqing, is called one of China's three furnaces. Located at the confluence of two major rivers, studded with lakes, it is frequently flooded by heavy rain and engulfed by stifling heat and humidity during the summer. Wuhan is also a busy inland port and transportation hub, transformed into a base for heavy industry in the 1950s. Mao visited the city at the height of the Great Leap Forward in September 1958 to inaugurate a giant iron and steel combine built with Soviet help, looking on as the molten iron from the first firing flowed out of the furnace.

In Wuhan, as elsewhere, sporadic fighting between the two main factions had continued for months, marked by lethal bursts of violence as thousands of combatants clashed with crowbars and homemade weapons. The old order had the upper hand, as the party leaders were protected by a citywide organisation of office employees, skilled workers, party activists and militiamen, boastfully called the Million Heroes. The rebels were a coalition composed of iron and steel workers, students and Red Guards from Beijing. In June they were under siege and threatened with complete annihilation, as the Million Heroes commandeered lorries to assault their stronghold across the Yangtze River Bridge, where the Wuhan Iron and Steel Company was located. Dozens of defenders died as the rebel headquarters were captured.

Chen Zaidao, the regional military commander, openly backed the Million Heroes. Determined to crush the opposition, he took little notice of Lin Biao's command in April, which prohibited the army from firing on rebels or disbanding their organisations.

Zhou Enlai flew to Wuhan on 14 July, keen to transmit orders from Beijing on the status of rebel organisations directly to the local leaders. He was joined in the evening by the Chairman, who was touring the south of the country on his private train. That same day other delegates were summoned to Wuhan to help with the negotiations, including Xie Fuzhi, the minister of public security who had urged the police to support the Red Guards in August 1966, and Wang Li, a suave man with a bankerly appearance who was used to travelling the country and cutting deals on behalf of the Cultural Revolution Group.

Zhou and his emissaries declared their support for the rebels in a series of stormy meetings with the top brass from the regional military command. There was great resistance, but in a private meeting Mao managed to convince Chen Zaidao that it was time for a self-criticism. Chen, loyal to the Chairman, gave in. Zhou flew back to Beijing, believing that the crisis had been resolved.

It was a premature move, as Chen Zaidao was unable to control the tense situation in the city. As rumours spread that the Million Heroes had become the target of a delegation headed by Xie Fuzhi and Wang Li, angry soldiers turned up in the evening at their hotel on the East Lake. In the early hours of 20 July, they dragged Wang to the military headquarters, where an enraged crowd beat him, tore out clumps of his hair and broke his ankle.

Lin Biao, who had a longstanding loathing for Chen Zaidao dating back to the civil war, when the military leader of Wuhan had served under Xu Xiangqian, sensed an opportunity to deal another blow to the veteran marshals who had opposed him in February. He played up the incident, sending one of his followers, Qiu Huizuo, with an alarmist letter endorsed by Jiang Qing, warning the Chairman that his life was in danger. Mao was furious, suspecting Lin of using him as a pawn in his own game, but went along after having spoken to Zhou Enlai, who had hurried back to Wuhan. The Chairman was escorted by air force fighters to Shanghai. Chaos descended on Wuhan, as bridges were closed, communication routes blocked, strategic



buildings occupied and the airport seized. Sirens sounded over the river, while loudspeaker vans blared slogans denouncing the rebels. Lorries careened through the streets, as the Million Heroes attacked their enemies throughout the city.

Li Zuopeng, deputy commander of the navy, was already in Wuhan to protect the Chairman. He was reinforced by airborne divisions from neighbouring Hubei province. Xie Fuzhi and Wang Li were rescued in a rebel operation and smuggled out of the city two days later.

Lin Biao immediately denounced the Wuhan incident as a ‘counter-revolutionary revolt’. The Chairman summoned all the Wuhan leaders to go and explain themselves in the capital, where the moment they landed they were surrounded by soldiers carrying rifles with fixed bayonets. They were questioned in a marathon meeting at the Capital West Hotel lasting six hours. Wu Faxian, commander-in-chief of the air force and protégé of Lin, was put in charge, shouting down and even slapping Chen Zaidao. Xu Xiangqian, his patron, was accused of standing behind the rebellion. Outside, a million people marched in a great rally, welcoming Xie Fuzhi and Wang Li as martyrs of the revolution. Slogans denouncing the mutiny blared from loudspeakers: ‘Down with Chen Zaidao!’ On 27 July, a new team of military leaders close to Lin Biao took control over Wuhan, forcibly disarming the units that had suppressed mass organisations. The Million Heroes collapsed. The rebels celebrated the ‘second liberation of Wuhan’, persecuting tens of thousands of their enemies.<sup>5</sup>

When the Chairman had met Zhou Enlai and Wang Li on 18 July during his visit to Wuhan, he had toyed with the idea of arming students and workers. A week later, Wang and the Cultural Revolution Group under Madame Mao penned an editorial for *Red Flag* entitled ‘The Proletariat Must Take Firm Hold of the Gun’. Published on 1 August, it called on mass organisations to seize weapons, invoking historic words from the Chairman: ‘If we do not seize the barrel of the gun, if we do not use the revolutionary armed forces to oppose the counter-revolutionary armed forces, people will never be able to liberate themselves.’ China’s Khrushchev, the article went on, had placed his henchmen Peng Dehuai and Luo Ruiqing inside the People’s Liberation Army to usurp power. Much as a handful of capitalist roaders must be pulled out of the party, a handful now needed to be dragged out of the army.<sup>6</sup>

That very same day, the Ministry of Defence held a banquet to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the People’s Liberation Army. The acting chief of staff Yang Chengwu gave the evening’s speech, referring to Peng Dehuai and Luo Ruiqing as counter-revolutionary revisionists. The applause from the top brass was weary, their faces expressionless. But Jiang Qing enlivened the evening, rising from her seat with Ye Qun, the wife of Lin Biao, to walk among the younger generation of delegates with glass in hand. Dressed in a neatly pressed military uniform, a cap on her short wavy hair, she toasted the revolutionary rebels and young cadets, seated away from the centre of the dining hall. Neither woman spared a glance for the colonels and generals gathered for the occasion.<sup>7</sup>

The *Red Flag* editorial hailed Lin Biao as the most faithful follower of the Chairman. Lin used the call to arms to beef up the credentials of Wu Faxian, Qiu Huizuo and Li Zuopeng, the three men who had assisted him in his takeover of Wuhan. All three had served under Lin Biao in the Fourth Field Army during the civil war, but had come under fire from the rank and file in the early months of 1967. Lin now denounced their attackers, demanding that the left be armed since ‘bad people are fighting good people’. It was another shot aimed at his opponents inside the army, the ‘handful of capitalist roaders’ who were usurping power: ‘This revolution is a revolution against the ones who carried out the revolution.’ Together with Huang Yongsheng, the military leader in Guangdong, Wu Faxian, Qiu Huizuo and Li Zuopeng would soon become the heir apparent’s ‘four guardian warriors’.<sup>8</sup>

The *Red Flag* editorial was nothing short of a call for civil war. The revolutionary task was no longer to seize government power, but to seize military power. As the announcement was read over the radio, rebels throughout the country began assaulting arsenals and military commands in their search for weapons. A tidal wave of violence engulfed the country, as Madame Mao and Lin Biao worked in concert to increase their power.<sup>9</sup>

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One of the first major battles took place in Shanghai. Days after the Chairman had arrived from Wuhan, Zhang Chunqiao requested that the workers be allowed to set up their own militias. Mao acquiesced. On 4 August, Wang Hongwen, the man who had led the assault on the city hall in January, assembled a small army of 100,000 workers armed with rattan hats and iron rods. Their target was a rebel faction that acted as a magnet for people holding a grudge against Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen – rebels excluded from power, students condemned as rightists, workers forced to disband their organisations. They were ensconced at the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory, a sprawling complex set up with Soviet help a decade earlier. A crane was used to smash the metal gates, while bulldozers levelled the mighty brick wall surrounding the compound. Teams of fighters rushed through the breach, fanning out to capture the buildings one after the other in a carefully planned military operation. All opposition was crushed. Many of the rebels were beaten black and blue, a few left for dead by the wayside. Over a thousand people were injured, and eighteen died. Mao, after watching footage of the battle, complimented Wang Hongwen on his victory.<sup>10</sup>

It was only the start. Soon the workers in Shanghai acquired light weapons and anti-aircraft artillery. By 1970, they had grown to a force of 800,000 militants, many of them equipped with semi-automatic weapons manufactured in local factories.<sup>11</sup>

Armed battles were much more vicious elsewhere. Like the assault on the Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory, all were engineered from above. In Changsha, where a loose coalition of rebels under the Xiang River Group had been declared ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and brutally crushed months earlier on Chen Boda’s personal order, on 10 August an urgent directive from Beijing overturned the verdict. Before the assembled provincial leaders, a representative of the People’s Liberation Army solemnly read out a telegram from the Cultural Revolution Group declaring that the Hunan Military Command had erred in attacking the rebels. The army was to support the Xiang River Group, since it alone represented the true left. The provincial leader was declared a ‘capitalist roader’, and the Cultural Revolution Group replaced him with the party secretary of Shaoshan, Mao’s birthplace.<sup>12</sup>

Hua Guofeng had built a huge memorial hall in Shaoshan dedicated to the Chairman three years earlier. Not unlike the Confucius Temple in Qufu, the complex included the former residence of the Chairman, the tombs of his parents, his private school, several ancestral temples and the obligatory statue. The Chairman was impressed. In June 1967 he had dispatched Zhou Enlai to negotiate Hua’s release from the hands of a rebel organisation. Now that he was in charge of the province, his first order of business was to crush the opposition. The Forty-Seventh Army was there to help. It had served under Lin Biao as part of the Fourth Field Army.

Power shifted overnight, as rebels attacked their erstwhile oppressors. They were exacting revenge, storming strongholds belonging to their opponents, smashing the windows, tearing down the broadcast system, burning papers and beating captives with leather belts. Ordinary people were having a field day, taking out their anger on the party activists, model workers and loyal cadres who had sided with the old order to make their lives so miserable.

But soon the rebels started fighting among themselves, as they could not agree on which military faction they should support. They squabbled over the apportionment of power, as some of them were not given seats on the provisional party committee. Old comrades became sworn enemies, as people started battling for the right to wield power in the name of Chairman Mao. The guns distributed by the Forty-Seventh Army no longer sufficed. They stole from the local militias, broke into arsenals and attacked military bases. They had grenades, bayonets, machine guns, cannon and anti-aircraft missiles. In the stifling summer heat, bullets whistled past in the streets, sirens wailed in the distance and lorries sped by. A curfew was imposed, but even in daytime ordinary people out to buy food risked being hit by stray bullets if they went too close to some of the strategic buildings guarded by armed

fighters. ‘People crisscrossed their windows with tape to prevent their shattering as the city shook with explosions and gunfire.’ Mortars were fired by inexperienced rebels. Some of the shells went astray, exploding on roofs, landing on the road or smashing into buildings. The night sky flashed. In daytime it glowed orange.<sup>13</sup>

Rebels used their weapons to secure dwindling food supplies, which were severely affected by a paralysed transportation system. There were endless cases of raids on grain shops. In August one on Panxi Lane, just off People’s Road in central Changsha, was robbed repeatedly, losing several tonnes of rice. Lorries would come to an abrupt halt in front of the shop, allowing armed rebels to jump off the back and commandeer sacks of grain ‘in support of the war’.<sup>14</sup>

Ordinary people took advantage of the civil war to pursue their own personal vendettas, and not just against their neighbours. Tens of thousands of villagers lived in Changsha without a permit. They beat up the civil servants in charge of the household registration system and ransacked their offices, prizing open chests of drawers in the hunt for documents. On twenty occasions that summer villagers pulled out a gun. In one case a disgruntled man brandished a revolver and shouted, ‘I will shoot anyone who tells me that I cannot have a residence permit!’ The scale of the unrest was unprecedented. In a single municipal district, in a mere ten days an estimated 2,600 people took part in similar incidents.<sup>15</sup>

Jiang Qing and Lin Biao were busy fomenting revolution across the country. In Gansu, one of the country’s poorest provinces, their target was Wang Feng, a party leader who had taken away responsibility for agricultural management from the people’s communes in the wake of Mao’s Great Famine and given it back to the villagers. In 1960 Xi Zhongxun had recommended him. Wang Feng’s position was increasingly precarious after the fall of his two other mentors, namely Peng Zhen and Deng Xiaoping. Wang became one of the first people whom the Chairman labelled a ‘counter-revolutionary revisionist’ during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>16</sup>

In Gansu, as in Hunan, the local military and the regional command were split. The country was divided into thirteen military regions, each covering two or three provinces, and named after the city where their headquarters were based. There were also provincial armies, subordinate to the military regions. The Lanzhou Military Region was a strategically vital part of the country, close to Xinjiang and Tibet. But the provincial army was also stationed in Lanzhou, and it was loyal to Wang Feng. Despite repeated instructions from Zhou Enlai, its commander refused to turn against his provincial boss. In May and June 1967, fierce confrontations tore the city apart. As elsewhere, a bewildering diversity of mass organisations tended to coalesce into two opposite factions. All were convinced that they were the true followers of Mao Zedong, but their opinions as to the loyalty of the local leaders were divided. One faction denounced Wang Feng and embraced Zhang Dazhi, the commander in charge of the Lanzhou Military Region. Its opponents saw Zhang Dazhi as the ‘Chen Zaidao’ of Lanzhou. They sided with Wang Feng and the provincial army.<sup>17</sup>

On 3 August, Beijing recognised the faction behind the Lanzhou Military Region as the ‘true left’. Coming a mere two days after *Red Flag* had called on the proletariat to ‘take firm hold of the gun’, this was followed throughout the province by assaults on arsenals and weapon factories. In Tianshui a group of Red Guards stormed a dynamite factory, absconding with hundreds of kilos of explosives. They used machine guns and mortars in their pursuit of revolution. In Pingliang all roads in and out of the county seat were blockaded. ‘City residents have nothing to eat, all factories have ground to a halt and shops are closed,’ one report noted. Thousands of people turned against the army, including hundreds of children armed with improvised weapons. In Heshui prisoners in a labour camp banded together, assaulting their guards and ransacking the offices in search of weapons.<sup>18</sup>

In Lanzhou everyone seemed to be joining the fray. Workers lashed screwdrivers on to spear shafts. Stones were hauled in baskets on to the roofs of buildings around the city. Even waiters and cooks in the main hotel gathered around an anvil in the kitchen to make weapons. Opponents pursued each other in broad daylight. A mob surrounded one man, stabbing him with improvised javelins until he collapsed in a pool of blood. An old man running a small shop had a spear driven through his stomach. The streets were littered with bodies.<sup>19</sup>

All along, Kang Sheng provided detailed instructions to Red Guard delegations in private meetings in Beijing. On 10 August, he undermined Wang Feng, enjoining his audience to support the Lanzhou Military Region and ignore those who denounced its leader Zhang Dazhi as a local ‘Chen Zaidao’.

But the leaders of the Cultural Revolution Group were not simply obedient followers of the Chairman. They used the campaign to settle their personal scores. In a one-party state, personal relations were far more important than ideology. Mao Zedong was not alone in easily taking offence, carefully noting every slight and using court politics to wreak revenge on his unwitting victims many years later. Madame Mao, decades earlier, had been left seething with resentment, forced to refrain from political activities the moment she married the Chairman. As head of the Cultural Revolution Group, she obsessively pursued family feuds and personal vendettas. The merest slip of the tongue in her presence could have fatal consequences.

Kang Sheng, too, was wilful and vindictive, excelling at concocting entirely fictitious accusations against his enemies. In September 1966, he wrote to the Chairman to express his suspicions of sixty-one leading party members who had surrendered to the nationalists in 1936 but had been allowed to recant by Liu Shaoqi. Liu Lantao, who had been Wang Feng’s mentor as first secretary of the north-west, was one of them. Mao initially rejected what would become known as ‘the Case of the Sixty-One Traitors’, but in March 1967 changed his mind. In the following months Red Guards investigated some 5,000 cadres, encouraged by Kang Sheng to ferret out hidden traitors in the party ranks. Several were hounded to their deaths.<sup>20</sup>

In his meeting with Red Guards from Lanzhou, Kang pointed his finger at an erstwhile colleague who had crossed him in the early 1950s. ‘You should get rid of Sha Tao,’ Kang said, explaining that he was a spy who had changed his name and worked under Liu Shaoqi before liberation. One week later, Sha Tao was dragged out by the Red Guards in Lanzhou and beaten up. He lingered in gaol for six years, interrogated regularly about his connections with other suspects. He survived the ordeal, and an inquiry years later cleared his name.<sup>21</sup>

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People now had weapons, and members of the Cultural Revolution Group encouraged them to fight in the name of revolution. In Chongqing, some Red Guards even managed to equip three gunboats with artillery cannon, clashing in August with a small fleet of ships manned by their opponents who opened fire with machine guns.<sup>22</sup> In Guangxi province, rebels raided freight trains with armaments in transit from the Soviet Union to Vietnam. On 19 August alone, thousands of anti-aircraft bullets were seized, fuelling the factional warfare.<sup>23</sup>

But the event that captured most foreign headlines was the burning of the British mission on the night of 22 August 1967. For months Red Guards had laid siege to the embassies of countries denounced as revisionist and imperialist. Earlier that year, a wall of hatred had started to surround the Soviet embassy, as crowds of self-righteous Red Guards blockaded the building, trapping 170 Russians inside. East European and even Western diplomats ran the gauntlet daily, insulted, spat upon and pushed around when bringing supplies of vodka, beer, bread and soup to their beleaguered colleagues. At one point, the Russians even filled their swimming pool with water, fearing that the municipality would cut off their supply. At night, the crowd lit bonfires, casting grim shadows of Soviet leaders lynched in effigy.<sup>24</sup>

In front of the Kenyan embassy, a straw figure with blackened face was hanged, dangling on the gate for many months. The Indonesian and Mongolian embassies were under permanent siege.<sup>25</sup>

All foreigners who expressed less than absolute loyalty became targets, but none attracted as much attention as the British. The reason was to be found

some 2,000 kilometres south of the capital, in the crown colony of Hong Kong. The city had become a watching post for the outside world after the bamboo curtain came down on China in 1949, but in May 1967 violence spilled across the border from the mainland. Hong Kong was shaken out of its spectator status. A strike at a plastic-flower factory in Kowloon quickly developed into a major public disturbance, joined by thousands of picketing workers. Many of them lived in shared cubicles in crowded tenements in Kowloon, with street upon street of tall, dilapidated buildings. Revolutionary youths took to the streets to demonstrate against the colonial authorities, waving the Little Red Book and chanting revolutionary slogans. As tensions rose, protesters started throwing stones and bottles at the police, who responded with clubs and tear gas. Soon crowds began erecting barricades in the streets, overturning cars and setting fire to a double-decker bus.

The local communist party initially orchestrated the trouble, but Beijing soon came to the rescue, alleging that the British were committing 'fascist atrocities' in Hong Kong. The British chargé d'affaires in Beijing, a placid, much decorated Second World War officer called Donald Hopson, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and presented with an ultimatum, including a demand that all those who had been arrested be released and compensated for their time in prison. London refused to answer.

Mass rallies in support of the protesters were organised in Guangzhou and Beijing. In Hong Kong posters went up demanding 'Blood for Blood', others screamed 'Stew the White-Skinned Pigs'. Tens of thousands of students and workers went on strike. Loudspeakers blasted propaganda from the Bank of China, while a dozen newspapers loyal to Beijing churned out inflammatory literature. But the campaign failed to garner wider support. Hong Kong was a city built by wave after wave of refugees from the mainland, and few among the working population of 1.5 million had any illusions about communism. By the end of June, the strike had begun to run out of steam.

Then, on 8 July, across the white demarcation line that split the small fishing village of Sha Tau Kok into British and Chinese sectors, some 300 armed protesters stormed the police post. First the police were pelted with stones and bottles, but after a while a machine gun started stuttering across the border, fatally mowing down five policemen on the British side. The incident rekindled the violence, and riots soon paralysed much of Hong Kong.

A curfew was imposed, as the police started raiding suspected centres of communist activity. Protesters retaliated with a spate of bomb attacks on police stations and government buildings. By the end of July, bombs, mixed with many decoys, had been planted in theatres, parks, markets and other public venues, severely disrupting routine life. Many were homemade devices, crudely put together by extracting gunpowder from firecrackers. But a few were lethal. One was wrapped like a gift, killing Wong Yee-man, a seven-year-old girl, as well as her brother aged two. Bomb-disposal experts defused as many as 8,000 devices. On 24 August, Lam Bun, a popular radio presenter fiercely critical of the communists, was trapped in his car by a death squad posing as road-maintenance workers. He and his cousin were doused in petrol and burned alive. Many other prominent figures who had spoken out against the demonstrators received death threats.<sup>26</sup>

All along, there were rumours in Hong Kong that Beijing was massing troops along the border and preparing to take back the colony. But the Chairman had a very shaky grip on the campaigns he unleashed, and in any event the communists needed the city as a banking platform and window on the rest of the world. The British possession depended critically on the water supply from the mainland, which provided 45 billion litres a year. The tap was never turned off.<sup>27</sup>

But after the Wuhan incident, the pressure on the British mission in Beijing increased. The real target, however, was not Britain, although ostensibly the Red Guards clamoured for retaliation after the colonial authorities had suppressed the demonstrators in Hong Kong. Members of the Cultural Revolution Group were targeting Zhou Enlai, whose position had been severely weakened after the Chairman had taken the veteran marshals to task in February. Zhou, his back against the wall, had sided with Mao, but was overshadowed by Jiang Qing as a result. Soon, incriminating evidence about the premier began to be leaked. In Beijing, posters went up denouncing him as a representative of the 'bourgeois reactionary line', and urging his overthrow. The most damaging document came from Tianjin, where rebels unearthed a newspaper article from the early 1930s, which claimed that he had resigned from the communist party.

The rebels sent their findings to the Chairman via Jiang Qing. Bristling with confidence, she was ready to expose Zhou, demanding that he come forward with a full confession. On 19 May, Zhou appealed to the Chairman, sending him a lengthy dossier to show that the newspaper item was a hoax planted at the time by his enemies. Mao, instead of shrugging off the incident, circulated Zhou's appeal to every member of the Cultural Revolution Group. They now had a weapon they could use any time they wished to crush Zhou Enlai. But the Chairman, always keen to play off one faction against another, had no desire to get rid of his premier. By the end of May, he had instructed Chen Boda to circulate a public note to Red Guards prohibiting them from finding fault with Zhou Enlai.<sup>28</sup>

The Wuhan incident further strengthened the hands of the Cultural Revolution Group. On 7 August, Wang Li, his foot in a cast, appeared at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse to call on radicals from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to seize power. Chen Yi, who was minister of foreign affairs, was already under siege by thousands of Red Guards at his home in Zhongnanhai. On 11 August he was forced to appear at a mass meeting where he was accused of wishing to capitulate to imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries. Wang Li's speech also encouraged a more confrontational tone towards the British in Hong Kong. On 20 August, the same day that Wong Yee-man and her little brother died, the British chargé d'affaires was given an ultimatum demanding that a ban on all communist publications in Hong Kong be lifted. The diplomatic note expired two days later.<sup>29</sup>

As the ultimatum became public, radical students started putting the British mission under pressure. On the morning of 22 August, a foreigner based at the Institute for Foreign Languages saw some of his students walk down the tree-lined street next to the school 'with the happily expectant air of summer picnickers'. They were carrying cans of gasoline. By lunchtime the crowd outside the British mission was so large that the twenty-two diplomats and support staff had been trapped inside.<sup>30</sup>

In the early evening, Polish diplomats tried to warn their British counterparts that Red Guards were rolling barrels of oil towards the mission, but the phone lines had been cut. Still unable to leave, some of the foreigners settled down for a game of bridge with Donald Hopson, while others watched Peter Sellers in *The Wrong Arm of the Law*. Outside, searchlights illuminated the building. At 10.00 p.m., a firework rocket was launched from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The crowd, which had been quiet and orderly, sitting down in tightly packed ranks, rose as one and started pushing angrily through a small cordon of soldiers who had linked arms in front of the gates. They roared into the compound and swiftly overran the building. Those trapped inside managed to withdraw behind a heavy metal door in the registry, reinforced by filing cabinets and an enormous brass lectern dating from 1900, when hundreds of foreigners had taken refuge in the British embassy, besieged for fifty-five days by the Qing army and a secret society of peasant fighters called the Boxers.

Flames appeared outside the registry, lapping at the wooden shutters outside the windows. Smoke entered the room, which was now plunged into darkness. Amid the sound of frantic shouting, blowing whistles and breaking windows, the insistent pounding of a battering ram could be heard. It broke through the brickwork and created a small hole in the wall. A hand grasping a flashlight appeared through the aperture. By now, as the smell of smoke was spreading, it became clear that surrender was the only option.

The party emerged through the emergency door to be met by a flurry of blows. Some were swept along by the mob and beaten on the back and shoulders. It was a restrained beating: the blows were painful but not crippling. Photographs were taken, but here too the ritual followed meticulous

rules. The head of the victim had to be pulled up by the hair or forced down while the arms were held tight by two men. In the mêlée, a few managed to reach the Finnish embassy opposite the mission. Others went into hiding. Soldiers herded the remaining members of the party towards a side road, moving them away from the crowd and eventually leading them to a lorry. It was a beautiful, still night. Flames from the burning building could be seen from several kilometres away. Long months of house arrest followed for the mission staff.<sup>31</sup>

It was the beginning of the end. The Cultural Revolution Group had gone too far. The following day, Zhou Enlai deflected criticism away from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by sending a copy of Wang Li's speech to the Chairman, who was still in Shanghai. Mao thought long and hard, and then gave his decision to Yang Chengwu, the acting chief of staff, to be relayed back to Beijing. The Chairman declared that Wang Li and several other members of the Cultural Revolution Group were 'bad people' out to wreck the revolution. 'Report this to the premier alone. Have them arrested and let the premier handle the situation.' Power shifted back from the Cultural Revolution Group to Zhou, as the next phase of the Cultural Revolution began.<sup>32</sup>



## Quenching the Fires

Wang Li was denounced in a secret meeting lasting eleven hours, chaired by Zhou Enlai. For good measure, his entire family including his in-laws were dismissed as nothing more than a ‘burrowful of black trash’.<sup>1</sup>

Wang Li, as well as two other members of the Cultural Revolution Group, took the fall for the burning of the British mission. The Chairman used the occasion to distance himself from the split developing within the army. He had made a point of reaching out to the veteran marshals in April 1967, calling on them to participate in his grand plan for unity. But they had come under pressure again after the incident in Wuhan, as a hunt ensued for smaller ‘Chen Zaidao’ figures inside the army. On 1 August, *Red Flag* had called on the proletariat to ‘take firm hold of the gun’, proposing that a handful of traitors be dragged out of the military. Mao realised that the damage done by the slogan was reaching dangerous proportions. He was wary of Lin Biao, who exploited the campaign to consolidate his grip on the army. The heir apparent used the fall of Chen Zaidao to place his own followers in charge of the Wuhan Military Region. A few weeks later, the Lanzhou Military Region declared its support for the Cultural Revolution Group. In Hunan, the Forty-Seventh Army, which in the past had served under Lin Biao, was asked to assist the rebels. And it was not merely the delicate balance of power inside the army that risked being upset. In several parts of the country, violent clashes occurred between different factions, each with their own links to the military.

The Chairman saw the danger. In Shanghai, he scrawled ‘Save our Great Wall’ along the incendiary *Red Flag* editorial. It was the term he used for the People’s Liberation Army. Respect for the army became the motto of the day. On 5 September, Jiang Qing, the very person who had encouraged an attack on the army a month earlier, told the rebels in stark terms that nobody had the right to steal weapons from the People’s Liberation Army. She warned them that the soldiers had been instructed to shoot back. Her speech was printed and widely circulated to signal the new party line. The same day, the Chairman signed a decree authorising the army to use self-defence against rebel organisations in an effort to end factional fighting. It was a signal of strong support for the People’s Liberation Army, praised as a ‘peerless people’s army’ led by ‘our great leader Chairman Mao’.<sup>2</sup>

A stream of editorials and announcements followed, as the Cultural Revolution Group tried to quench the fire it had kindled a month earlier. The Chairman toured the country, visiting areas where the fighting had verged on civil war and calling for a great alliance of all revolutionary forces. ‘There is no reason whatsoever for the working class to split into two irreconcilable organisations,’ the Chairman concluded. His statement was repeatedly broadcast to the entire nation as part of a Great Strategic Plan that called for all factions to unite under the banner of proletarian discipline.<sup>3</sup>

The revolution was in retreat. In Beijing, posters were scraped from walls, windows and pavements to prepare for National Day on 1 October. ‘No description can convey to those who have not seen it for themselves an accurate picture of the extent to which the poster-writers had submerged this city in a sea of paper,’ one resident noted. After days of scrubbing, the walls were almost clean. Only official slogans and posters were now allowed, and they proclaimed the importance of unity, work and support for the People’s Liberation Army. On university campuses, loudspeakers blasted the same message day after day: ‘Unite Together!’, ‘Among Workers There Can Be No Fundamental Contradictions!’<sup>4</sup>

On 1 October, in a great show of co-ordinated unity, half a million soldiers marched across Tiananmen Square, led by an enormous, silver-coloured, plastic figure of Mao pointing the way forward. They were followed by hundreds of thousands of citizens, forced to march together, many in contingents with members from opposed factions. The rostrum was packed with figures from the army. The old marshals occupied prominent positions next to the Chairman, including Chen Yi, Xu Xiangqian and Ye Jianying.<sup>5</sup>

*Red Flag*, the magazine which had become the mouthpiece of the Cultural Revolution Group, fell silent. Jiang Qing stepped back, and then left Beijing altogether to seek rest in Hangzhou. By the end of 1967, the Cultural Revolution Group was in a state of virtual eclipse. Zhou Enlai took centre stage, spending most of his time negotiating behind the scenes, trying to unite different factions into the much publicised great alliance. The Chairman had now set a deadline for revolution, deciding that revolutionary party committees should be established everywhere by the end of 1968. The goal was no longer to be achieved through violent power seizures, but through peaceful negotiation. One batch of squabbling delegates after another arrived in the capital, as the premier tried to hammer out compromises in the Great Hall of the People between the different factions vying for a seat on the new revolutionary committees.<sup>6</sup>

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A third faction appeared, popularly referred to as the ‘free and unfettered’. This was the party of the disaffected, and it was deliberately apolitical and leaderless. Its ranks were filled with members of mass organisations who quietly withdrew from factional warfare. They came from all sides of the political spectrum, but had one thing in common, namely disillusionment with politics. By the end of 1967, Ken Ling found it difficult to gather enough people to hold a mass meeting in Xiamen. Where thousands had proudly displayed their weapons over the summer, no more than a few hundred still responded to the call. ‘At the various headquarters the staff thinned out, and eventually entire offices became deserted.’<sup>7</sup> People had become more cynical. There was weariness, if not distaste, about the fighting, political or otherwise. Boredom and lethargy also set in. The Cultural Revolution had dragged on too long. Any sense of excitement had vanished. Those who had once agitated in the name of revolutionary justice were less sure about the mutual invective, the torture and the killings. Some found sleeping at night difficult.

Disaffected students spent time helping with family chores, reading novels or playing cards and chess. It was a relatively unconstrained life, but one marked by boredom. The parks had been vandalised, libraries were closed, and clubs of any kind prohibited. ‘There were virtually no books, no music, no films, no theatre, no museums, no teahouses, almost no way of keeping oneself occupied – except cards, which, though not officially sanctioned, made a stealthy comeback.’<sup>8</sup>

Some started playing music or assembling transistor radios at home. Leisure activities condemned as ‘bourgeois’ enjoyed a revival. In Xi’an, Kang Zhengguo and some of his friends found a pile of phonograph records in the Great Mosque, located in the Muslim quarter of the provincial capital. Kang took recordings of Russian folk songs back home. ‘For the people I knew, this period was a miniature renaissance, a touch of spring in a cultural wasteland.’<sup>9</sup>

Kang also quietly obtained a variety of books, including some of the great classics of Chinese literature. One such was an unexpurgated edition of *The Golden Lotus*, an erotic novel set in the Northern Song dynasty and depicting the sexual adventures of a wealthy libertine. Unfortunately some of the key pages were missing. Zhai Zhenhua, who joined the ranks of the unfettered the moment her Red Guard organisation expelled her in March 1967, obtained



reading material from the school library. The building was boarded up, as most of the windows had been shattered, but some of the planks were loose enough to be moved to one side. Students had never been allowed to roam around the bookshelves before the Cultural Revolution. Now she had her pick of all the forbidden books. Her favourite was a biography of Marie Curie.<sup>10</sup>

Others travelled. People got on their bicycles and started exploring the countryside. A few took to the road, drawing on the lessons learned during the dizzy heights of free travel a year before. But they stayed clear of historical sites associated with the communist party, heading for nature instead. Song Yongyi, a student who earlier that year had joined a rebel group fighting Zhang Chunqiao, hitchhiked from Shanghai to Huangshan, a strikingly beautiful mountain range in south Anhui with hot springs, pine forests and rugged granite peaks vanishing into clouds. He and his friends paid their way by bartering Mao badges.<sup>11</sup>

Students were not the only ones to withdraw from politics. Some rebel workers, too, drifted into a life of seemingly carefree leisure, as lax discipline at work left those tired of politics with plenty of spare time. In Nanjing, Fang Zifen joined a circle of friends who all shared a bad class background. They enjoyed talking about music, literature and cinema. Like Kang Zhengguo, they found a stash of records confiscated by Red Guards during the house raids a year earlier. Tchaikovsky and Mozart were their favourites. They also organised excursions to some of the historic sites at Purple Mountain, where Chen Zhigao had swallowed a vial of cyanide in May 1966.<sup>12</sup>

A few joined gangs. There was a thriving underworld in the cities, as professional criminals vied with sworn brotherhoods of like-minded youngsters, attracting orphans, juvenile delinquents, fallen Red Guards, children whose parents had been sent to re-education camps and villagers hiding in the city. Many of these gangs replicated the party hierarchy with a command structure divided into several ranks. Most were miserably poor, but at least their members seemed to live ‘beyond political life’, more or less free of the ceaseless campaigns of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

But as factional violence started abating and the army increasingly assumed power, those few realms of relative freedom came to an end. Weapons were turned in, students returned to school, and workers went back on full shifts.

Cadres suspected of ‘revisionism’ were given a chance to remould their thoughts and rejoin the ranks of the great revolutionary alliance – under the supervision of the army. In Changsha, where the military had brought a gory summer of fighting to an end, batch after batch of suspect cadres were sent to the city’s party school to attend Mao Zedong Thought study classes while their cases were being investigated. Many saw this as a chance to prove themselves and were relieved to be protected from the endless parades and struggle meetings to which mass organisations had subjected them.<sup>14</sup>

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As the prestige of the party waned, so the cult of Mao increased. Everywhere study classes in Mao Zedong Thought were convened. The People’s Liberation Army had stood behind Mao Zedong Thought years earlier, and now it used the cult of its leader to impose order and discipline. The cult of personality, as Lin Biao phrased it, would unite ‘the entire party, the entire army, and the entire people’.

A new campaign called the Three Loyalties and Four Boundless Loves was launched in March 1968. It brought the worship of Mao to new heights, requiring absolute loyalty to the Chairman, his thought and the proletarian revolutionary line. In schools, offices and factories, altars were set up to Chairman Mao. Large characters reading ‘The Red Sun in Our Hearts’ were cut out in bright, shiny red paper, forming an arc over a picture of the Chairman. Sun-rays emanated from his head. One office worker remembers that:

Every morning we would stand in front of this with our Little Red Books and read aloud a few passages. Then waving the Little Red Book we would say three times, ‘Great Leader, Teacher, Helmsman Chairman Mao, May You Live Ten Thousand Years’ and ‘Good Health Forever to Vice-Chairman Lin Biao!’ It struck me as absurd, almost like a religion. Most of us felt that way, as I was to discover after the Cultural Revolution. At the time, however, no one in their right mind would dare say so openly, let alone discuss it.<sup>15</sup>

In newly opened classrooms, too, everything except the Little Red Book was in short supply. Gao Yuan and his schoolmates had to assemble before the Chairman every morning and every evening, chanting slogans, singing songs and waving the Little Red Book. It was a welcome respite from the bloody wars that factions had fought in Zhengding over the summer, and soon some of the students started taking the campaign in a new direction. Chairman Mao quotation contests became popular. The very same students who had learned how to seize buildings, kidnap enemies, torture captives, forge weapons and fire guns were now trying to outdo each other in mastering the Little Red Book. One student could recite all 270 pages without missing a word. Another could come up with the correct citation when prompted with any page number from the red book. Gao did not do very well, but managed to impress his peers with his flawless recitation of the Chairman’s poems. Before long, people were trading quotations in everyday situations, replacing small talk with words of wisdom from the Chairman.<sup>16</sup>

In the capital miniature shrines went on sale, with three leaves in the form of a triptych. The centre had a portrait of the Chairman, while the outer panels carried quotations. These cult objects took the place of the old family altar at home, as people met the gaze of the Chairman the moment they woke up and reported back to him in the evening.

There was even a loyalty dance, consisting of a few simple moves with outstretched arms from the heart to the Chairman’s portrait. The dance was accompanied by the song ‘Beloved Chairman Mao’. On television, entire evenings were devoted to ritual song and dance. A giant bust usually occupied the centre of the stage, producing rays that throbbed and flickered with electricity, as if light and energy poured forth from the godhead.<sup>17</sup>

Statues of Chairman Mao, usually in death-white plaster, became ubiquitous in classrooms, office lobbies and meeting rooms. Life-size statues appeared in every vestibule and corridor. Outdoors, on university campuses and city parks, towering monuments portrayed him with his right arm outstretched to acknowledge homage from the masses. In Chengdu, the city where the first armed confrontations had taken place in April, an ancient palace gate in a central location was blown up with dynamite to make room for a giant statue. Special lorries, called ‘loyalty lorries’ with red silk ribbons like a float in a parade, shipped the white marble from the mountains. At the quarry, groups of sweating workers discarded all machinery to work with their bare hands in a show of loyalty to the leader.<sup>18</sup>

Government units vied with each other in displaying better, taller and more expensive statues. In 1968, more than 600,000 of them were dotted across the institutional landscape of Shanghai. Many were made of plaster, but reinforced concrete, aluminium and tinplate, besides marble, were also used. Some towered above pedestrians at a majestic fifteen metres, others stood at a more modest three metres. Scarce resources were expended in the informal competition, and in 1968 the city used 900 tonnes of tinplate alone. The Steel Institute, rather predictably, turned to stainless steel to erect its monument at a cost of 100,000 yuan. Another unit diverted close to 40 tonnes of concrete, originally earmarked for the construction of a storage room, to erect its sculpture.<sup>19</sup>

The demand for posters, portraits, altars, busts and statues dedicated to the leader seemed endless, but the production of cult objects was fraught with danger. A wrong stroke of the brush, a faltering hand on the plaster, any seemingly innocuous mistake could have lasting political consequences. Artists, like everybody else, were state employees, and they were envisaged as empty vessels who linked the people to their leader by faithfully reproducing his image. There were plenty of snoops and snitches ready to denounce an artist for wittingly or unwittingly introducing a personal touch into the portrayal

of the Chairman. In Shanghai, ordinary people put pen to paper to complain of the ‘adverse political influence’ of poorly executed portraits of the Chairman. Chen Suzhen, seeking security in numbers, wrote a petition signed by his colleagues from the Hygiene Department to complain about ‘insufficiently solemn and earnest’ representations of their leader. Apparently such paintings ‘make people feel deeply aggrieved when they see them’.<sup>20</sup>

There were serious consequences for artists. Zhang Zhenshi, a famous portrait painter who created one of the most reproduced images of Mao, was viciously beaten up because one of his works depicted the Chairman with his face slightly inclined in the wrong direction. Shi Lu, a painter, woodblock printer and calligrapher from a family of wealthy landowners, was taken to task for his 1959 painting in which he had placed the Chairman in front of a cliff, suggesting that the leader had no way forward. In 1967, Shi was locked up for three years.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, few professional artists were willing to risk their careers by churning out the endless icons requested by the market. The gap between supply and demand was exploited by enterprising individuals, often from politically dubious class backgrounds. Fang Zifen, who spent his leisure time discussing classical music with friends in Nanjing, executed large murals for government units that could not afford more established artists. Rather than being paid in cash he was offered room and board. A large work took up to twenty days, a smaller one a full week. The job gave him plenty of time to read.<sup>22</sup>

Xiao Mu was another outcast from a bad class background who ironically thrived thanks to the cult of personality. An intellectual condemned as a ‘rightist’ for having spoken out during the Hundred Flowers a decade earlier, he and his team earned up to a thousand yuan a month painting large slogans on government walls. They were paid by the character, and they literally turned entire towns red. He briefly tried his hand at sculpture, but it was a much riskier affair, as reject products had to be hidden in a burlap sack and dumped at night in a lake. Frightened of being accused of besmirching the Chairman, after a couple of days he abandoned the project.<sup>23</sup>

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The campaign cooled in March 1968. After the burning of the British mission in August 1967, the Chairman had ordered a retreat. The Cultural Revolution Group had gone too far, calling for a purge inside the army and encouraging rebels to seize weapons. It paid the price, as Mao purged several of its members. The last one to fall was Qi Benyu, a radical theorist and frequent contributor to *Red Flag*. He was arrested, tried and sent to prison in January 1968. But while Mao wished to protect the army and restrain factional violence, he had no desire to jettison the Cultural Revolution altogether. He was alarmed by the speed with which the army was taking over the reins of power, and wary of its skill in promoting Mao Zedong Thought as a cover for its own authority. The revolutionary party committees which were being set up across the country were heavily dominated by army officers. They looked uncomfortably like military governments, concentrating real power in the hands of the army.

Many of these committees were dominated by regional officers faithful to the veteran marshals. While Lin Biao had scored a big victory over the summer, placing some of his allies in key positions in several military regions, his authority over the army was far from absolute. After the fall of Luo Ruiqing, Lin Biao himself had recommended Yang Chengwu, the acting chief of staff who had shuttled back and forth between Zhou Enlai and the Chairman in September. But after February 1967 Lin Biao started having doubts about Yang, as the acting chief of staff began siding with Zhou Enlai in trying to protect some of the older marshals. Yang accompanied Mao on his long trips throughout the country, but was evasive when asked by Lin Biao to report what the Chairman had said.<sup>24</sup>

Another potential threat came from Fu Chongbi, the Beijing Garrison commander. Like Yang Chengwu, his loyalties were with the old marshals, and throughout the Cultural Revolution he had used his troops in the capital to protect army generals from rebel attacks. His men were responsible for providing security for the top leaders. They guarded Lin Biao’s residence and the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, where the Cultural Revolution Group had its offices. If ever the old guard were to attempt a coup, he would be one of the keys to power.<sup>25</sup>

In November 1967, Yang wrote an editorial calling on the nation to ‘establish the absolute authority of Mao Zedong Thought in a big way and a special way’. The Chairman fired a warning shot in the form of a brief note sent on 17 December to Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai and the Cultural Revolution Group. The Chairman indicated that all authority was invariably relative. He tried to shore up the credentials of the Cultural Revolution Group. By the end of January 1968, Jiang Qing came out of her retreat, meeting with representatives of rebels from around the country. On 15 March, she hinted darkly at the danger of ‘rightism’, which she saw as the ‘principal danger’. A few days later, flanked by Lin Biao’s wife Ye Qun, Kang Sheng, Chen Boda and Wu Faxian, she explained to delegates from Zhejiang that ‘rightist splittism has raised its head from last winter to the present’.<sup>26</sup>

A week later, on 22 March, Fu Chongbi, Yang Chengwu and a political commissar in the air force were purged. Jiang Qing alleged that the Beijing Garrison commander had conspired to assault her headquarters with armed forces under the direction of the acting chief of staff. Huang Yongsheng, the military leader in Guangdong, took over from Yang Chengwu. He was one of Lin Biao’s ‘four guardian warriors’. Another loyal follower of the heir apparent took command of the capital’s garrison.

Effusive praise for Jiang Qing followed from Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai two days later. She played an ‘outstanding role’, she had ‘great creative power’, she had ‘great merits’ and she was a ‘great proletarian fighter’. ‘We should all learn from her!’ Zhou Enlai enthused at a meeting of the top brass in the Great Hall of the People. Extreme deference followed from other leaders. Prolonged tributes appeared in newspapers. On 7 April the *People’s Daily* took the step of describing Lin Biao as well as Jiang Qing as Mao’s ‘closest comrades-in-arms’. Bookshops apparently started taking orders for the ‘Selected Speeches of Comrade Jiang Qing’, although the book never appeared.<sup>27</sup>

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The hopes of the rebels were revived the moment Yang Chengwu was arrested. In Zhengding, Gao Yuan began dreaming of a change of fortune. His enemies had long boasted that the local military command who backed them had a direct link to Yang Chengwu. They had now lost their most important spokesman. But he was soon disappointed. The county revolutionary committee was dominated by officers from the local military command. One of his classmates, the leader of the opposition, became vice-chairman.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the country there were repercussions, as ‘counter-revolutionary double-dealers’ who had followed Yang Chengwu were hounded in Shandong, Liaoning and Shanxi provinces. Factional fighting, which had flickered on and off across parts of the country, blazed with renewed fury in Hunan, Sichuan, Guangdong and Guangxi. But the situation became even more bewildering as the Chairman fostered competing military factions in the country. He needed the heir apparent to push through the Cultural Revolution, but he was also wary of his growing power. Many of Lin Biao’s loyal supporters came from the Fourth Field Army. Mao instead propped up the Fourth Front Army, led by Marshal Xu Xiangqian, and the Second Field Army, which had served under Deng Xiaoping. He used generals from the local military to contain Lin Biao.

One such was Xu Shiyong. A burly, gold-toothed man dubbed the ‘monk general’ because he had enrolled as an apprentice monk in a Shaolin temple before joining the communists in the mid-1920s, Xu had served in the Fourth Front Army under Zhang Guotao. Mao clashed with Zhang during the Long March, and a brutal purge of the Fourth Front Army was carried out in Yan’an. Xu Shiyong was accused of heading a ‘counter-revolutionary clique’, but

Mao redeemed him, personally removing his shackles. Xu denounced his erstwhile leader as an ‘opportunist’ and ‘adventurer’ and devoted the rest of his career to serving the Chairman. He was as loyal as a dog from the pound. In 1954 he became commander of the Nanjing Military Region. He despised the Red Guards, calling them bandits who disrupted social order, and showed contempt for the radical ideologists gathered around Jiang Qing. He became a target of rebels in 1967 and had to go into hiding. Mao, again, intervened. Mao knew that the strategically vital lower Yangtze River would be under his control with Xu Shiyu, who stood next to the Chairman at the National Day parades in Beijing on 1 October 1967. When after months of protracted negotiations between different factions a provincial revolutionary committee was finally formed in Nanjing, Mao made sure that Xu was the top man. Xu promptly proceeded to tighten his grip by targeting his former opponents and potential rivals.<sup>29</sup>

An even more critical region from a military point of view was Guangxi province, which shared a 600-kilometre border with Vietnam. Neighbouring Guangdong, with its powerful air force and naval base, was under the leadership of Huang Yongsheng. Whoever controlled both provinces could build up a power base in the south and challenge the capital. Like every other province, there were two main factions in Guangxi. One group stood behind the provincial head, a local man named Wei Guoqing. Wei was born into a Zhuang family, an ethnic group common in Guangxi, and had joined the communists at the age of sixteen. He had risen through the ranks under Deng Xiaoping and was close to the Second Field Army. A weak coalition of rebels opposed him. Wei Guoqing had the backing of the provincial army, but the regional military command was in the hands of Huang Yongsheng in Guangzhou. In February 1967, following the Chairman’s order to ‘support the left’, a unit from the Fifty-Fifth Army closely associated with Lin Biao’s Fourth Field Army was dispatched into Guangxi to reinforce the rebels. They were soon joined by Wu Jinnan, the deputy secretary of Guangxi. Both factions fought ferociously, each backed by different troops. Zhou Enlai stood by Wei Guoqing. In June Kang Sheng even denounced Wu Jinnan as a traitor. But after the Wuhan incident in July, Wei Guoqing, in turn, was attacked as the ‘Chen Zaidao’ of Guangxi province. Both sides now openly seized weapons from the army. They assaulted freight trains shipping armaments to Vietnam. Bloody battles took place over the summer. On 22 July, in the provincial capital Nanning 300 people were killed in a clash involving tens of thousands of fighters.<sup>30</sup>

Interference from above turned factional strife into a full-blown civil war. Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao were waging a proxy war, each trying to place his own men in the revolutionary committee that would dominate Guangxi. By the end of 1967, mortars, machine guns and napalm were used in the military battles for control of key cities in the province. But the balance of power started shifting towards Wei Guoqing. On several occasions, Mao slipped in a word in his favour. After Wei had offered a self-criticism in November, the Chairman declared that Wei had merely made a ‘few mistakes’ which could easily be corrected. A few months later, Zhou Enlai offered to send a battalion to help Wei Guoqing crush the rebels. Troops from the Fifty-Fifth Army started quietly withdrawing, leaving the rebels to their fate. By March 1968, large-scale massacres were claiming thousands of rebel victims.<sup>31</sup>

On 3 July 1968, Mao finally intervened, condemning the factional fighting in Guangxi as an attempt by a ‘small group of class enemies to sabotage the dictatorship of the proletariat’. He ordered an immediate end to the violence. Wei seized the opportunity to persecute his opponents, giving the order that they be eliminated in a ‘force 12 typhoon against class enemies’. In Nanning, where the rebels had several strongholds on Liberation Road, an entire district came under sustained fire. After two weeks of heavy bombardment by mortar and cannon, more than 2,000 houses in the area were reduced to rubble. Thousands of rebels were locked up in makeshift prisons. Many were interrogated and tortured. More than 2,000 were later executed. A group of twenty-six prisoners were shot on the spot by soldiers in front of a photographic studio. Unable to dislodge several thousand rebels hiding inside a concrete bomb shelter, the military opened the floodgates of a nearby river to flush them out. So many bodies were strewn across the city that corpses were tossed into coalmines and ditches. A team of cremators, divided into eight groups, was busy for weeks burning more than 600 bodies. Large amounts of formaldehyde and other disinfectants were used to clean up the shelter, but the stench of putrefying flesh lingered for many weeks in the hot, humid summer.<sup>32</sup>

As monsoon rain swelled the main rivers running through Guangxi, thousands of bodies were carried along, moving past rice fields and karst mountains to end up in the Pearl River, not far from Hong Kong, some 500 kilometres downstream from Nanning. Here they joined the bodies of victims in Guangzhou, where factional fighting also raged that summer. Police in the British crown colony fished dozens out of the harbour, many of them trussed up and badly mutilated. Passengers on the ferry to Macau saw corpses floating among the flotsam and jetsam carried downstream from the mainland.<sup>33</sup>

Across the entire province of Guangxi, as many as 80,000 people were killed that summer. The local militia joined forces with the army to hunt down alleged rebels and political outcasts. In Liujiang, some of the victims were decapitated in public, their heads displayed with a note reading ‘counter-revolutionary’. In one people’s commune, where rumours circulated about an imminent counter-revolutionary plot in which landlords would come and claim back their land, some sixty people were frogmarched to an abandoned field and forced to kneel as their heads were smashed with hammers.<sup>34</sup>

But the worst violence occurred in Wuxuan, an old market town set among soaring limestone mountains. A river runs through the town. A long flight of flagstone steps leads to its bank, where large, flat rocks were used as a butcher’s block. Zhou Shi’an was one of the victims. He was a ‘bad element’ who had been sentenced to seven years in prison for having stolen a sack of rice during Mao’s Great Famine. He returned home from a labour camp in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, during which his younger brother had headed a rebel organisation. ‘This is Zhou Wei’an’s elder brother. He wants to take revenge for his brother!’ one of the persecutors cried. His brother had already been sliced up, his head and one of his legs displayed in the market. Now came Zhou Shi’an’s turn, as his chest was cut open with a five-inch knife. He was still alive. A local boss extracted his heart and liver. Other villagers followed suit, stripping the victim to the bone. In total more than seventy victims were cannibalised in Wuxuan.

There was a hierarchy in the ritual consumption of class enemies. Leaders feasted on the heart and liver, mixed with pork and a sprinkling of local spices, while ordinary villagers were allowed only to peck at the victims’ arms and thighs. After several teachers had been sliced up in a middle school, a crowd carried away chunks of flesh in bags dripping with blood. Students cooked the meat in casseroles sitting on top of small, improvised brick barbecues. The deputy director of the school’s revolutionary committee, who oversaw the butchery, was later expelled from the party, but was proud of his actions: ‘Cannibalism? It was the landlord’s flesh! The spy’s flesh!’ One subsequent investigation listed all the ways in which people had been killed in Wuxuan, including ‘beating, drowning, shooting, stabbing, chopping, dragging, cutting up alive, crushing and hanging to death’.<sup>35</sup>

On 26 August 1968 a new revolutionary committee was finally set up in Guangxi province. The founding ceremony took place amid much fanfare, including the unveiling of a large, marble statue of the Chairman. A congratulatory telegram arrived from Beijing.

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When Mao had blamed factional strife in Guangxi on ‘class enemies’ and ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and had demanded an immediate halt to the violence in his directive dated 3 July 1968, his words were directed at rebels across the nation. Although his pronouncements were widely disseminated, in parts of the country the violence continued unabated. On 24 July a new command was issued, demanding that all rebels comply with the 3 July directive and lay down their weapons. In the following days, to propagate the new party line, the Chairman sent into the universities massive Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams formed by workers.

On 27 July, some 30,000 workers from more than sixty factories approached Tsinghua University, waving copies of the 3 July directive and shouting ‘fight with words, not with weapons’. They met stiff resistance from hard-core remnants of the Red Guards, armed with sub-machine guns, rifles and



even a makeshift tank. The students opened fire and killed five workers, wounding many more. The majority of students, by now, had deserted their campuses. Those still holding out had become lost in a seemingly endless cycle of factional strife that had taken on a life of its own. But their ranks had been replenished with the arrival of hundreds of rebels from other provinces. Some had managed to escape from Nanning, where Wei Guoqing had laid siege to Liberation Road. Kuai Dafu, the fiery leader who had stood up to the work team two years earlier, now proclaimed that a ‘black hand’ had sent the workers to crush his revolution.<sup>36</sup>

Kuai and four other Red Guard leaders were summoned to a meeting at the Great Hall of the People. Days earlier, on 25 July, Zhou Enlai and Kang Sheng had met separately with rebels from Guangxi, accusing them of working on behalf of class enemies. Kang Sheng had grilled them: ‘What rumours have you come to spread in Beijing? What black meetings have you attended? What black activities have you conducted? Which black headquarters provide you with instructions?’ Chen Boda had interjected: ‘Do you think Tsinghua University can solve your problems? Kuai Dafu should not be too arrogant. Do they understand what Marxism is, what Mao Zedong Thought is?’<sup>37</sup>

At the Great Hall of the People, Mao was flanked by Jiang Qing, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, Ye Qun, Kang Sheng, Xie Fuzhi and other members of the Cultural Revolution Group. Facing them were five of the most powerful commanders of the Red Guards, including Nie Yuanzi, by now also vice-chair of the municipal revolutionary committee. Kuai Dafu was late, still embroiled in the fighting at Tsinghua University. The Chairman set the tone, mocking Kuai’s claim that a black hand was behind the propaganda team sent to his campus. ‘I am the black hand! Kuai Dafu did not come, but he should have come to arrest me!’

Mao accused the rebels of deliberately ignoring his directive of 3 July:

There are those who say that the directive about Guangxi only applies to Guangxi, the directive about Shaanxi only applies to Shaanxi, and they do not apply here. Well, let me issue a directive for the whole of the country right now: whoever still continues to rebel, attack the People’s Liberation Army, sabotage transportation, kill people or set fire to property is a criminal. If there is a small number of people who do not listen and refuse to reform, then they are bandits, they are nationalists, they are trying to encircle us, and if they persist then we will have to exterminate them.<sup>38</sup>

On 5 August, exactly two years after the Chairman had declared ‘Bombard the Headquarters’ in his own big-character poster, he sent a basket of mangoes to the workers of the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda team at Tsinghua University. The mangoes were a gift to Mao Zedong from Pakistan’s foreign minister, on an official visit in Beijing. The following day the propaganda machine went into overdrive. Newspapers reported the jubilation and excitement of the workers. They cheered with joy and wept with gratitude, pledging their loyalty to the Chairman by chanting his quotations. Everyone understood the message, even Nien Cheng, the widow of the former manager of Shell whose house had been raided several times by Red Guards. Reading the *People’s Daily* from her cell in the Number One Detention House in Shanghai, she realised that the mangoes were a clear and eloquent warning to the students not to resist the disciplinary actions of the propaganda team. It was a signal that the workers were back in charge. If the message was not clear enough, Yao Wenyuan penned an article providing the theoretical underpinning of the last stage of the revolution. It was entitled ‘The Working Class Must Exercise Leadership in Everything’.<sup>39</sup>

It was the end of the Red Guards. After a last impassioned round of accusations and counter-accusations, the incessant din of loudspeakers on university campuses ceased. A blissful silence settled over Beijing. The students now looked grim, marching behind portraits of the Chairman out of habit rather than conviction. Mao had suspended the Cultural Revolution.<sup>40</sup>

Over the next couple of weeks, propaganda teams marched into universities and schools all over the country. They were formally called ‘Worker and Peasant Propaganda Teams for Mao Zedong Thought’, although the teams included no farmers and only a few workers. They were composed of military men in civilian clothes and loyal party cadres.

With the propaganda teams came mango mania. At Tsinghua University one of the sacred mangoes was pickled in a jar of formaldehyde, to be displayed for all to see. Soon plastic and wax replicas appeared, as millions of workers queued up to catch a glimpse of the mango reliquary. In the oilfields of Daqing, close to the border with Siberia, the visit was compulsory, and all workers were taken in unheated buses in the middle of the winter at minus 30 degrees Celsius to see the national treasure. Everybody knew that these were wax imitations, but nobody said anything. Mangoes appeared on badges, pencil boxes, sweet wrappers, quilt covers, washbasins, mugs and trays. Giant ones were paraded in floats on National Day on 1 October. A film entitled *The Song of the Mango* appeared.<sup>41</sup>

On 7 September 1968, standing on the rostrum in Tiananmen Square, Zhou Enlai announced an all-round victory. Revolutionary committees had been established in all provinces and major cities. ‘Now the whole country is red . . . Now we can declare that through repeated struggles during the past twenty months we have finally smashed the plot of the handful of top party persons in authority taking the capitalist road – counter-revolutionary revisionists, renegades, enemy agents and traitors headed by China’s Khrushchev to restore capitalism – and fulfil the great call issued by our great leader Chairman Mao.’ A month later Liu Shaoqi was formally expelled from the party and declared a ‘renegade, traitor and scab hiding in the party and a running dog of imperialism, modern revisionism and the nationalist reactionaries who has committed innumerable crimes’.<sup>42</sup>

## PART THREE

### THE BLACK YEARS (1968–1971)



## Cleansing the Ranks

When, on 7 September 1968, Zhou Enlai proclaimed that the whole country was drenched in triumphant red, he also called for a great cleansing of the class ranks. It was time to settle accounts. A campaign to ferret out traitors and renegades had been unfolding for many months, and now came to the forefront. It would dominate the lives of ordinary people and party members alike, as millions were persecuted from the summer of 1968 to the autumn of 1969.

The campaign had its origins in the Case of the Sixty-One Traitors, concocted by Kang Sheng in March 1967 to convince the Chairman that dozens of the most senior members of the party had been renegades who had surrendered to the nationalists in the 1930s. Mao used the case to accuse Liu Shaoqi of treachery, a charge that carried the death penalty. More than 5,000 cadres were investigated in the following months, with some hounded to their deaths.

On 5 February 1968 the situation escalated, as the leadership circulated a report on how more than a hundred renegades and double-dealers related to the Sixty-One Traitors had been uncovered in Heilongjiang province alone: 'Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Tao Zhu and their accomplices Peng Dehuai, He Long, Peng Zhen, Luo Ruiqing, Lu Dingyi, Yang Shangkun, An Ziwen, Xiao Hua and others, all of them renegades and counter-revolutionary revisionists, have hidden within the party, usurped important posts in the party and government organs and formed a renegade clique.' The directive demanded that the archives of enemy and puppet governments before liberation be examined so that hidden enemies, secret agents, and people with links to foreign powers as well as counter-revolutionaries could be unearthed and expelled from the party ranks.<sup>1</sup>

A month later, on 18 March, as Jiang Qing appeared with members of the Cultural Revolution Group at the Great Hall of the People to explain how 'rightism' was the new enemy, Kang Sheng went further. 'The big task of the Cultural Revolution is to drag out traitors and secret agents hidden inside the ranks of the party.' Liu Shaoqi, he announced, was a traitor who had first surrendered to the nationalists and the Japanese. His wife Wang Guangmei was a secret agent of the United States, Japan and the nationalists. 'Peng Zhen is a big renegade. Peng Dehuai is a spy and a traitor. Luo Ruiqing is a secret agent who never joined the communist party.' He Long was a bandit. Lu Dingyi was a secret agent on the payroll of Chiang Kai-shek. Tan Zhenlin ('we now have proof!') was also a turncoat. As Kang Sheng was about to reach the end of his stunning indictment of former leaders of the communist party, Jiang Qing leaned forward to shout 'Down with Deng Xiaoping!' Kang promptly added that Deng Xiaoping was a deserter. The targets of the Cultural Revolution were no longer 'capitalist roaders' or even 'revisionists', but secret agents operating in the service of the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

In May, the Chairman officially gave his seal of approval to the campaign. He read a report on a printing plant in Beijing, where troops from the Central Guard Unit had followed the 5 February circular and managed to uncover more than twenty enemy agents who had wormed their way into the party after liberation. 'Of all the material of this kind that I have read, this one is the best written.'<sup>3</sup>

The Chairman delegated the task of ferreting out enemy agents to the new revolutionary committees. They used the campaign to eradicate their own enemies. In schools, factories and government offices, revolutionary committees set up their own prisons and established their own prosecuting committees, acting as judge, jury and executioner.

Real and imagined enemies had to be periodically expelled from the ranks. The history of communism is, after all, a history of endless purges. But this campaign differed qualitatively from its predecessors. The Cultural Revolution had battered the party, the government and the army. The Chairman had disliked the sprawling machinery of the one-party state, with its overlapping jurisdictions and conflicting interests. He aspired to a more responsive chain of command, one in which his orders could be carried out instantly and without question. The upshot was the revolutionary committees. Dominated by the army, they concentrated unprecedented power in a few hands. Generals headed roughly half of all the revolutionary committees at the provincial level. The people's republic, by the summer of 1968, increasingly resembled a military dictatorship.

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The timing varied from place to place, but the campaign to cleanse the party ranks was in full swing between the summer of 1968 and the autumn of 1969. Spies were uncovered everywhere. In Shanghai, where underground organisations had flourished from the 1920s, thousands of members who had clandestinely joined the party before liberation were cross-examined. Since the communists and their enemies had played a lethal game of deceit and double-dealing, with agents switching loyalties, planting evidence or using false names for more than two decades, plenty of scope existed to trump up charges of treachery. A total of thirty-nine enemy organisations were uncovered, and more than 3,600 people were detained and persecuted. Those who had joined the party or worked for the government after the communists conquered the city were also interrogated. In total, some 170,000 people were harassed in one way or another. More than 5,400 committed suicide, were beaten to death or were executed.<sup>4</sup>

There were victims in the upper echelons of power as well. Of the twenty leading officials who had dominated the municipal party committee before the Cultural Revolution, all but three were denounced as 'traitors, spies and capitalist roaders'. However, the vast majority of victims were ordinary people with no party affiliation. Anyone with a foreign link in their past became suspect. Since the metropolis before 1949 had had a larger foreign population than any other city except New York, and more foreign investment than either London or Paris, almost everybody above the age of thirty was implicated. The Shanghai Conservatory, for instance, was established in 1929 by a graduate from the Geneva Conservatory of Music. Within a decade it had flourished into a world-class institution, attracting international staff of the calibre of Alexander Tcherepnin, a Russian-born composer and pianist. Chen Youxin, chairman of the Orchestra Department and one of the first Chinese to join the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, jumped from the roof of a skyscraper. Shen Zhibai, chairman of the Chinese Music Department, also committed suicide. By the end of 1968, more than a dozen people from the conservatory had been driven to their deaths.<sup>5</sup>

Anyone who had ever been involved in foreign trade was suspect. Nien Cheng was dragged out of the Number One Detention House to be confronted by former members of staff, assembled at struggle meetings carefully choreographed by party leaders. Former friends were denounced as 'foreign intelligence officers'. A woman employed as her secretary, one of the many Russians who had found refuge in Shanghai after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was unmasked as a double agent for Britain and the Soviet Union. People were relentlessly threatened, pressured, interrogated and finally degraded, forced to level the most fantastic accusations against their erstwhile colleagues. 'The sum total of the accusations was an amateurish attempt at a spy drama without a convincing central theme, beginning or end,' Nien noted acerbically. A former chief accountant of Shell, visibly overcome with emotion, confessed in a faltering voice that he was a spy who had been promised a large sum of money by Nien if he would work for the enemy. In prison, Nien was grilled for days in an interrogation room decorated with a portrait of the Chairman. During these long sessions, as Mao stared down at

her, Nien detected a smirk of malevolent self-satisfaction in his face. The worst period of her incarceration had just begun.<sup>6</sup>

In Beijing some 68,000 people were unmasked over the summer of 1968. More than 400 victims were beaten to death.<sup>7</sup> In secondary schools and universities, teachers were no longer persecuted by Red Guards, but by the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams. The question was who, among the many people denounced during the Cultural Revolution as ‘black gang members’ or ‘counter-revolutionaries’, would be allowed to teach again, and who was truly an enemy. In order to cleanse the ranks and sort out friend from foe, teachers, cadres and students were forced to move into dormitories, where they lived together under constant mutual supervision. Influential intellectuals were first singled out for public criticism, then others were investigated.

The criteria used to identify a class enemy were vague. It was enough to misread a passage from the Little Red Book during a study session to be accused of a counter-revolutionary offence. But soon enough it became apparent who the real targets were. At Peking University, where Nie Yuanzi had denounced the leadership in her big-character poster in May 1966, all those who in the past had been close to the disgraced president were singled out. ‘It was becoming clear that the propaganda team’s unspoken goal was the permanent destruction of a whole group of teachers and cadres formerly esteemed by Lu Ping,’ the president of the university who had been denounced as a close associate of Mayor Peng Zhen. At one point a quiet man who was an expert in experimental phonetics was declared a counter-revolutionary in the middle of a study session. Everybody was stunned. The team leader used the occasion to announce triumphantly that even a person who had never spoken about political matters could be an enemy in his heart, and such inner convictions could no longer be concealed from the proletariat.<sup>8</sup>

The pressure was too much for some to handle. At Peking University, twenty-three people committed suicide. One drank insecticide and another jumped from a window, but most of the victims hanged themselves. In the History Department, a Marxist historian and committed member of the communist party who had devoted his life to the revolution took an overdose of sleeping pills with his wife. They were found lying side by side on their bed, their clothes neatly arranged, with peaceful expressions on their faces. The body of a lecturer in ancient history accused of being a spy was discovered in an office, covered in lacerations. One administrator committed suicide. Similar stories could be told of departments across colleges and universities in the capital and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

By the spring of 1969 the total number of victims in Beijing reached 100,000. These were ‘diehard capitalists’, ‘reactionary capitalists’, ‘spies’, ‘traitors’, ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘reactionary intellectuals’, but the vast majority were social outcasts, those condemned to dwell at the bottom of society by virtue of a bad class background.<sup>10</sup>

In every province, revolutionary committees settled old scores, sometimes charging their enemies with imaginary crimes, occasionally finding scapegoats to fill a quota, invariably using the campaign to crush the local population. Although the bulk of suspected class enemies were uncovered in the cities, county seats did not lag far behind. Across Hebei, more than 76,000 people were incarcerated as the authorities uncovered enemy organisations. In Qiuxian county, over a thousand victims, or roughly 1 per cent of the population, were locked up. Forty houses were commandeered in the main town, since local prisons could not hold all the inmates. Some were detained for a week, while others stayed for many months. Many were accused of belonging to a ‘New Nationalist Party’ controlled from Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. Torture chambers sprang up across the county, as confessions were extracted from the victims under duress, implicating ever more people. Hundreds of homes were raided and ransacked for incriminating evidence, floorboards torn up, walls demolished. The head of the revolutionary committee had a simple saying: ‘Kill a batch, arrest a batch and handle a batch.’ More than 700 people were hounded to their deaths and 1,316 crippled or maimed for life. Meanwhile, half the population lived in abject poverty, as agriculture was neglected and output plummeted. A subsequent inquiry revealed that the entire affair was a complete invention.<sup>11</sup>

Other branches of the ‘New Nationalist Party’ were discovered in Hebei. In one village alone, over a hundred suspects in Weixian county were hung from beams and beaten. Some were tied together with wire that pierced their ears. In the Baigezhuang state farm, a sprawling labour camp with 100,000 inmates, established in 1956 outside the province’s port of Tangshan, hundreds of victims were hauled to an interrogation room where ‘seventy torture methods’ were used to extract confessions. More than 130 people died. Some of the bodies were never recovered, even after the case had been thrown out a few years later.<sup>12</sup>

Although the campaign was guided from above, people from all walks of life took the opportunity to settle grudges or right past wrongs. In Shijiazhuang, the drab railway hub just south of Zhengding where Gao Yuan’s enemies had had the upper hand, an average of thirty-eight denunciation letters reached the party headquarters every day in May 1969, twice as many as usual. In Xinle, in addition to the daily post, a throng of people turned up at the county revolutionary committee personally to inform on their neighbours or colleagues. In Cangzhou, also in Hebei, a vigilante group of twenty elderly women systematically checked the status of all the residents on Victory Road. Their aim, they stated, was to find out ‘if there were suspicious people’. Their search yielded a lonely man who had so far managed to hide his status as a former landlord.<sup>13</sup>

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There were over 2,000 counties across the country, and in each of the vast majority of these more than a hundred people were beaten to death or driven to suicide during the campaign to cleanse the class ranks. In some cases the body count reached four to five hundred victims. In Guangdong province as a whole, one estimate puts the number of unnatural deaths at 40,000.<sup>14</sup>

Border regions like Guangdong were more prone to violence than others, and not only because they seemed to harbour so many more unreliable elements living in close proximity to countries considered to be hostile. They were home to many ethnic minorities who were suspected of divided allegiances. In Yunnan, a subtropical province sharing a border with Vietnam, Laos and Burma, the regime classified a third of the population as belonging to ‘minority nationalities’, quite a few of whom had historically straddled the frontier, moving in and out of the country. Kang Sheng viewed the region with deep suspicion, and accused the provincial party secretary Zhao Jianmin of being a ‘hidden traitor’ and ‘nationalist spy’. Xie Fuzhi, the minister of public security who had run the province until 1959 and had plenty of personal scores to settle, abetted him.

In January 1968, at a meeting in the Capital West Hotel, Kang Sheng pointed a finger at Zhao Jianmin: ‘I rely on my forty years of revolutionary experience, and I have a feeling that you harbour deep class hatred towards Chairman Mao and the party leadership.’ With these words, a campaign was started to root out Zhao’s network of spies in Yunnan. Tens of thousands of people were implicated. Some of these were ethnic minorities. Shadian, a predominantly Muslim town close to Vietnam, was declared a counter-revolutionary stronghold, and hundreds of people were arrested, humiliated, tortured and locked up. Across the province, by 1969 the witch-hunt had resulted in 17,000 deaths and 61,000 people who were crippled for life.<sup>15</sup>

Inner Mongolia also came under suspicion. Spanning more than a tenth of the country’s landmass, it bordered Mongolia and the Soviet Union. Much of it was a plateau covered by loess, sand deposits and grasslands. In 1947, with strategic support from Stalin and the Red Army, the communist party had managed to seize control of the region, proclaiming an Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The Chinese Communist Party absorbed members of the Mongolian People’s Party, established years earlier by a Soviet-trained Mongol named Ulanfu.

Ulanfu, who went by the nickname of ‘Mongolian Khan’, became leader of the province. But in the aftermath of Mao’s Great Famine, as the extent of

the devastation caused by radical collectivisation became clear, he started to distance himself from the Chairman, using harsh words to condemn the Great Leap Forward at the Seven Thousand Cadre Conference in January 1962. In Inner Mongolia, he relaxed his control over the collectives, and largely sidestepped the Socialist Education Campaign spearheaded by Liu Shaoqi. As the slogan ‘Never Forget Class Struggle’ became all the rage, Ulanfu expressed doubts over the very existence of class differences: ‘In the minds of most herdsmen, there are no classes, and it is subjective to impose them.’ In June 1966, he was summoned to Beijing for six weeks of gruelling meetings. On 2 July, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping took turns to accuse Ulanfu in harsh terms of every conceivable crime, from ‘using production to replace class struggle’, ‘promoting ethnic splittism’ and ‘establishing an independent kingdom’ to ‘revisionism’ and ‘opposing Chairman Mao’. Ulanfu disappeared from view.<sup>16</sup>

Kang Sheng and Xie Fuzhi revisited the whole affair in early 1968, as they launched a campaign of terror against former members of the Mongolian People’s Party, set up by Ulanfu in the 1930s, who were now suspected of being spies and traitors. Most of its members had been ordinary Mongol farmers and herdsmen, and they bore the brunt of the campaign. Torture chambers appeared across the province, as around 800,000 people were incarcerated, interrogated and denounced in mass meetings. The methods used against the victims plumbed the depths of horror, even by the standards of the Cultural Revolution. Tongues were ripped out, teeth extracted with pliers, eyes gouged from their sockets, flesh branded with hot irons. Women were sexually abused, their breasts, belly and lower parts singed with canes heated in the fire. Men were lashed on the back with leather whips, the flesh torn so badly that the backbone was sometimes exposed. A few people were burned alive.<sup>17</sup>

Although less than 10 per cent of the population were Mongols, they constituted more than 75 per cent of the victims. In some areas, almost every one of them was rounded up. At the railway bureau in Hohhot, all but two of the 446 Mongol employees were persecuted. Large swathes of the Mongol elite – cadres, managers, scholars, technicians – were wiped out. The Mongolian language was banned from all publications. Estimates of the total number of deaths range from 16,000 to 23,000. It looked like genocide. The main instigator of the massacres was Teng Haiqing, a general who headed the provincial revolutionary committee. In May 1969 the Chairman ordered him to halt, but he was never brought to justice. Inner Mongolia was placed under military control. The province was dismembered, with most of its territory integrated into neighbouring provinces.<sup>18</sup>

## Up the Mountains, Down to the Villages

The campaign to cleanse the class ranks was about spies, renegades and traitors who had wormed their way into the party before the Cultural Revolution. It did not generally affect young people. When Zhou Enlai had appeared at the rostrum in Tiananmen Square on 7 September 1968, hailing the revolutionary committees, he had envisioned something very different: students should 'go down to the country's factories, mines and villages to learn from the masses'.<sup>1</sup>

In schools and campuses, students spent the autumn studying under the auspices of the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams. But on 22 December 1968 came the official decree: 'We have two hands, let us not laze about in the city,' declared the *People's Daily*. The Chairman ordered students to go down to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants.<sup>2</sup>

Over the following months, the towns and cities were emptied of young people. Millions of students would be transported to remote regions in the countryside in the following decade. In Beijing, columns could be seen marching towards the railway station, stretching as far as the eye could see, banners waving, brass bands playing, faces bright with anticipation. The station was crowded with students, parents and friends, 'some stepping onto the train with handbags and washbasins, others holding onto windowsills to talk to those inside'. Loudspeakers blasted revolutionary songs, one of them with lyrics from the Chairman's Little Red Book: 'The world is yours, and also ours. But it is, in the final analysis, yours. You young people are full of vigour and vitality like the eight or nine o'clock sun in the morning. You are our hope.' Zhai Zhenhua had heard the excerpt a hundred times before. It had filled her with pride. But on the day of her departure to Yan'an the words rang hollow. 'The world is ours?' she asked herself. 'Bullshit!'<sup>3</sup>

Many had already left voluntarily after Zhou Enlai's call to learn from the masses in September. They were genuine believers and loyal followers of the Chairman. Some thought that this would be the true test of their generation, since they were the red inheritors of the revolution and leaders of tomorrow: they could steel themselves in the countryside and further the revolutionary cause.

Students sent to military farms in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria were proud to join the People's Liberation Army. Gao Yuan felt that he was finally fulfilling his destiny when he was recruited to join the army. His winter uniform was made of the best cotton. 'I admired myself in a big mirror. Never had I had such fine clothes. Now, short of a red star, I was a true soldier.'<sup>4</sup>

Other volunteers were driven by a vision of pastoral bliss. The countryside was pictured as a site of great beauty and plenty for all. Rae Yang, the student from Beijing who had tried to save her cat from her fellow Red Guards, had high hopes for the Great Northern Wilderness, the popular name given to Manchuria: 'In my mind it was a mysterious and exciting place. Vast stretch of virgin land. Boundless pine forest on snowy mountains. Log cabins. Campfires. Hunting and skiing. Wild animals. Hidden enemies. Spies sneaked across the border from the Soviet Union at night.'<sup>5</sup>

In some cases students had been so enthralled by the idea of direct contact with the peasants, the backbone of the revolution, that they set off on their own even before the campaign had officially started. Xu Xiaodi and her friend, both aged sixteen, rode on their bicycles to Daxing county from Beijing to do manual labour for 30 cents a day in the summer of 1968. The experiment ended after a month, as rumours started circulating in the village about the restoration of capitalist labour relations.<sup>6</sup>

Those with fewer illusions were simply bored, having been confined to their dormitories for months on end. They, too, yearned for something new.

But there was also resistance. Exile to the countryside was supposed to be permanent. Students had to hand in their registration card at the police station and could no longer legally reside in a city. They lost all the perks and privileges associated with urban residency, not to mention the trauma they underwent of permanent separation from family and friends.

In Hunan, between a quarter and half of all students who received their marching orders feigned ignorance in the hope that the campaign would blow over. Many parents refused to lose their children to the countryside, pleading with local cadres or pulling strings with their superiors. They rushed to find employment for their offspring in local government units or factories before they could be transported to rural areas. This happened with four out of every ten students in Qiangyang county. Others doctored their identity papers or faked the names of their children. A few parents were openly defiant: 'My daughter is being persecuted and transported to the countryside because of my political mistakes. But I am no counter-revolutionary, and if you want my daughter to leave for the countryside you will have to clear my name, or else she will not spend one single day away from home, even if I have to buy grain on the black market to feed her, so let's see what you are going to do about it!'

And families were not alone. There were many mass organisations, set up during the Cultural Revolution, that maintained links with their former members and now tried to help, hiding some of the students in the city. Some cadres even refused point blank to comply with the policy: 'I would rather carry out conscription work ten times over! I will never send young students to the countryside.'

The students themselves resisted, especially once news about real life in the countryside started filtering back to the city from the first batches of sent-down students. 'Alive I will not go to the countryside, dead on a stretcher I will,' in the words of one rebel.<sup>7</sup>

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As soon as Rae Yang arrived in Manchuria, her illusions were shattered. There were no snow-capped mountains and primeval forests in the area she had been sent to. Instead she found a huge swamp infested by millions of mosquitoes. They were big and bloodthirsty, biting through her working clothes. Work started at six in the morning in the fields, seven days a week, and the food was barely adequate. She had to trudge through the mud, one foot deep, to cut soybean with a sickle. Rae had to do battle with her own body, pushing herself to the very limit. 'This is the test, the trial, the firing line,' she thought, fearful of collapsing in the fields. She did not wash at first, as there was no public bathhouse or private bathroom. After nits had hatched in her hair, she learned how to clean herself in a tin basin in the dormitory, naked in front of all the others. Even washing clothes was a chore, as water had to be drawn from a well and carried back on a pole. It was ice cold.<sup>8</sup>

She was lucky. Many students did not have a roof over their head. In Hubei, this was the case for roughly half of all exiled students, as many lived in caves, abandoned temples, pigsties or sheds. In Hunan province, three out of four students had no fixed abode. Some were forced to wander from place to place every few weeks, while others only managed to get hold of a dilapidated shed exposed to wind and rain. Officially they arrived in their allocated village with a housing subsidy, but the local cadres often confiscated this. When the authorities tried to remedy the housing shortage by providing funds for timber, village leaders used these instead to construct coffins. In one case a family buried a relative and after a few days dug up the coffin, handing the planks back to the student.<sup>9</sup>



Furniture was scarce. In the drive to increase steel output during the Great Leap Forward, villagers had cut down trees, using the timber to feed backyard furnaces. In Hunan, lush woods had been denuded, replaced by bare mountains. Near Changsha, a once dense forest had been turned into a vast expanse of mud. By the time of the Cultural Revolution, the province was far from having recovered from the effects of deforestation, and timber remained a rare commodity. Even in the cities, buying a bed was a challenge, forcing some people to sleep on the floor. In Tianmen, a county in Hubei, some students went without a bed or a mosquito net, ‘and some do not even have a pot and a bowl’.<sup>10</sup>

In rural areas, keeping a fire going was a problem, let alone building furniture. Villagers were always on the lookout for brushwood. Chaff, left over after threshing the grain, was also used for fuel. In the Qiuling region, where the mountain was called Bare Mountain since it had sustained a savage assault during the Great Leap Forward, the villagers had to forage for twigs up to 8 kilometres away from home.<sup>11</sup>

Hunan was no exception. In Shandong, lack of fuel worsened with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, as the amount of coal made available to ordinary people was cut by one-third. In the winter of 1968–9, as young students were being sent to the countryside, some villagers burned their own furniture and then the thatch on their roofs to stay warm. In Laixi small bridges were taken down and chopped up for kindling. Pigs died of hunger because the fodder was used as fuel.<sup>12</sup>

Food was also scarce. The villagers had a hard time simply looking after themselves, never mind feeding extra mouths. Mao’s Great Famine was largely over by 1962, but famine continued to reduce tens of millions to a starvation diet. Even in the cities food was insufficient. In Nanjing, by the spring of 1966, just before living conditions deteriorated again with the Cultural Revolution, meat was still rationed and the only vegetables to be found on the market were mouldy or spoilt. The Yangtze River flowed past the city’s western gate, but people still had to queue for fish. Fistfights broke out over fruit, as only 3 to 4 tonnes reached the market each day, averaging a few grams per person.<sup>13</sup>

Conditions in parts of the countryside were far worse. When Ken Ling and his classmates travelled through Anhui and Shandong in the autumn of 1966, they had repeatedly seen beggars and vagabonds. The fields were barren, and trees had been stripped of bark. ‘From time to time we saw corpses by the tracks.’ Accurate statistics do not exist, but in the case of Shandong province alone, 10 million people lacked food in the spring of 1966. In Cangzhou, thousands suffered from famine oedema, as parts of their bodies swelled from water retention. Having sold all their belongings, including their own clothes, many took to the roads to beg. In Juancheng, some of the famished sold their own children. A year later, 14 million people were starving in the province. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, for many villagers hunger was never far away.<sup>14</sup>

Most students were taken aback by the sheer destitution they discovered in the countryside. Wen Guanzhong, who came from a home near the Zikawei Library in Shanghai, was sent to Siping, a region in Manchuria bloodied by ferocious battles during the civil war. His family had been forced to barter all their possessions for food, and they used to huddle together for meals on the bare floor, but nothing had prepared him for the abject poverty he found in the countryside. The villagers lived in huts built of grass, straw and mud. When it rained the huts disintegrated, melting into the dirt. Whole families had only one set of clothes, hiding inside stark naked. Whatever food there was came teeming with maggots and flies.<sup>15</sup>

Numbers provide a sense of scale that is often lacking in personal interviews and reminiscences. In many parts of Hunan, up to three-quarters of the exiled students lacked food. Across the Hengyang region, where 17,000 young people were confined to the villages, 83 per cent went hungry.<sup>16</sup>

Zhai Zhenhua, exiled to a cave in Yan’an, the cradle of revolution where only two years earlier eager Red Guards had queued up to visit the Chairman’s childhood dwelling, had cornbread and a dish of potatoes and pickled cabbage every day. Meat was rare, and vegetable oil used sparsely.<sup>17</sup>

A student exiled to Manchuria survived on a diet of boiled cabbages, potatoes and beets. She did not see oil once in the first five months after her arrival. With the onset of winter, as temperatures plunged to 40 degrees below zero, the canteen served nothing but a salty broth with a few vegetable leaves. Across the Great Northern Wilderness, hard work combined with poor diet caused nine out of every ten female students to suffer from menstrual problems.<sup>18</sup>

Other diseases were common. In Jiangxi and Yunnan, probably the worst provinces for exile, one in six students sent from Shanghai suffered from a chronic disease, ranging from liver infection to heart disease. Those banished to the north of the country suffered from goitre, caused by prolonged lack of iodine. Some diseases were so debilitating that the victims could no longer work, falling into a spiral of illness, malnutrition and underperformance.<sup>19</sup>

Morbidity rates are hard to come by, but in Hunan cases of premature death among educated youngsters were described by one team of investigators as ‘ceaseless’. There were reports of poisoning and drowning, not to mention suicide. Violence was endemic, and some students became embroiled in village politics. They were found dead by the roadside. In production teams run by the military, discipline was strict and physical punishment common. In Yunnan alone, many young students were beaten by soldiers, three of them to death.<sup>20</sup>

A few wrote to protest about their conditions. One young man in Hunan remembered his pride at being selected to work in the countryside in 1969. ‘And now? I simply while away the days. I have lost interest in books and newspapers, and I have lost any concern for the fatherland’s future or mankind’s dreams. I merely get through the motions by mechanically eating, working and eating again, as if I have become a mere beast working to earn a living.’ Another young student felt so marginalised by the villagers that he repeatedly demanded that the authorities back in his home town give him a life sentence in a labour camp instead (he clearly had no idea of what life was like behind bars). Zhai Zhenhua hated her life, which she described as an ‘unwanted, pointless existence’: ‘My country could not find any better use for us but dumped us all like dirt in the countryside. The peasants did not need us; we were their burden and only gave them trouble.’<sup>21</sup>

Work, especially for those enrolled in production units run by the army, was excruciating at first, but the sheer tedium of daily life also became a challenge. As Rae noted about her swamp in Manchuria, ‘there was no TV, no movies, no library, no ping-pong, no chess, no poker’. Some of the students managed to get hold of books, while others put together transistors, listening to foreign radio. A few went hunting for wild dogs or scavenged for plants, berries and nuts. Others banded together, stealing food from the fields at night.<sup>22</sup>

Girls were vulnerable. Those enrolled in military production units or sent in batches to the countryside found safety in numbers, but many were alone, helpless, bewildered and often at the mercy of village leaders. Sexual abuse was common in a one-party state that rewarded male bullies, but now displaced students found themselves at the very bottom of the pecking order in the countryside, more vulnerable than ever. In a brigade in Fuyang county, Anhui, six young women were molested. Two of the victims committed suicide, and one lost her mind.<sup>23</sup>

Some victims took their cases to the higher authorities, alone or in groups. From Huanggang, Hubei, came a letter signed by ten young women who explained that from the moment that they had arrived in the countryside all of them had been harassed and molested. Several became pregnant and were forced to marry their rapists. But generally few girls complained. When they did, they were ignored at best, although many were ostracised even further by the villagers. A few were even accused of having abetted rape through ‘improper behaviour’.<sup>24</sup>

In any event, the local response was at best half hearted. A few perpetrators were shot in Hunan in 1971, but as the authorities noted, ‘in some places the rape and forced marriage of young women is considered to be part of normal sexual relationships’. Blaming local culture, of course, was a way of evading responsibility. Nobody in the higher echelons of power wished to query the Chairman’s wisdom of having young students from the cities



undergo ‘re-education by the masses’.<sup>25</sup>

It was Mao who had decided to send millions of young people into exile in 1968, and it was Mao who partially redeemed them in 1973. He signalled his concern in a personal response to a letter from Li Qinglin, a school teacher in Fujian who wrote to the Chairman about the appalling conditions his son was enduring in the countryside. The Chairman generously sent the man 300 yuan: ‘Comrade Li Qinglin, the issue you wrote about seems ubiquitous around the country and needs to be solved as a whole. Please accept this 300 yuan. I hope it can help you to some degree. Mao Zedong.’<sup>26</sup>

A flurry of activity followed. Emergency meetings were held in Zhongnanhai, chaired by Zhou Enlai, whom the Chairman implicitly blamed for the state of affairs. Cases of rape suddenly came to light across the country. In Hubei, a systematic investigation conducted in Tianmen county, located a mere 60 kilometres to the west of Wuhan, revealed that between 1969 and 1973 more than 200 young women had been molested, raped or otherwise ‘destroyed’, to use the report’s terminology. Some were as young as fourteen. Li Xiannian, the vice-premier who had been party secretary of the province for many years, personally wrote in the margin of the report: ‘I’m afraid that in Hubei it’s not just Tianmen county, what about the other counties?’ Since there were more than forty counties in Hubei, by extrapolation from these figures at least 8,000 women had been abused in that province alone.<sup>27</sup>

Similar reports reached the capital from other parts of the country. In Liaoning province 3,400 cases of assault or rape were uncovered. The leadership was outraged. ‘The Ministry of Public Security should act! Don’t be soft-hearted!’ Zhou Enlai exclaimed. ‘Kill the bastards, otherwise we can’t appease the people!’ cried Li Xiannian. The following year, over 500 people were sentenced for molesting, attacking or raping young students in Hubei. Seven were sentenced to death.<sup>28</sup>

Conditions improved somewhat, but the campaign did not abate. Every year a million young students were sent into exile. Even after the Chairman’s death, many of them could not leave the countryside. Some had married, and others were unable to obtain an urban residency permit. In total, from 1962 to 1978, some 18 to 20 million students were banished from the cities.

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The students were not the only ones to be sent to rural areas. As soon as the bamboo curtain came down in 1949, the new regime had started emptying the cities of entire categories of people described as a threat to social order and a drain on public resources. Prostitutes, paupers and pickpockets, as well as millions of refugees and disbanded soldiers, were sent to the countryside, which became the great dumping ground for all undesirable elements. In the intervening years, as the household registration system imposed strict controls on the movement of people, a sometimes deadly game of cat and mouse developed. The most effective strategy for survival in the countryside was to leave the village and migrate to the city. The authorities needed cheap labour, so often they turned a blind eye to the incomers. A vast underclass was created, relegated to dirty, arduous and sometimes dangerous jobs. Migrant workers had no secure status, and risked expulsion back to the countryside at any time. Once in a while, a purge would cleanse the cities of people without proper documentation. Those who were caught were sent back to their villages, while hardened recidivists were dispatched to the gulag.

In 1958, at the height of the Great Leap Forward, as targets for industrial output were ceaselessly revised upwards, more than 15 million villagers moved to the city. But three years later, with the country bankrupt, 20 million people were deported back to the countryside.<sup>29</sup>

When, on 7 September 1968, Zhou Enlai had announced that students should go up the mountains and down to the villages to learn from the great proletarian masses, he had also urged the party to cleanse the class ranks and ‘streamline the administration’, sending superfluous staff back to join production in the countryside. Millions of people had used the chaos of the Cultural Revolution to find their way to the city, and now the premier indicated that the time for their deportation had come.<sup>30</sup>

The scale of the transportations was staggering, by far surpassing what had happened under the Red Guards in the summer of 1966, when nationwide some 400,000 people from bad family backgrounds had been hounded out of the cities. From Shanghai alone, up to 1975, roughly a third of a million people were removed, not including 950,000 students. In some cases, in smaller cities, the number of ordinary people banished to the countryside actually exceeded exiled students by a factor of two to one. In the single county of Lingling, a hilly part of southern Hunan where several rivers converged, 35,000 city dwellers were dispersed throughout the countryside compared to 17,000 students. In Hengyang, by the Dongting Lake, there were 30,000 ordinary people in exile, twice as many as banished students. Nine out of ten teetered on the edge of starvation, having to make do with a mere 12 kilos of unhusked grain a month, equivalent to less than 1,000 calories a day, far below the 23 to 26 kilos required to provide 1,700 to 1,900 calories per day, an amount international aid organisations consider the bare minimum for subsistence.<sup>31</sup>

Entire families were deported, regardless of their ability to survive. Huang Ying, condemned as a ‘counter-revolutionary’, aged sixty-one, was sent off with his mother-in-law, wife and daughter. Liu Sucai, a hunchback, had a wife who suffered from a learning disability, leaving him in charge of their four children aged four to fourteen. He was unable to make ends meet in the countryside, where hard labour earned most villagers barely enough food to survive on their own, let alone feed entire families. Liu was not an isolated example. In roughly one-fifth of all families in exile in Hunan, the main provider was unable to earn enough work points to look after others, whether children, sick people, the disabled or the elderly. In many cases, people with no experience of farming – pedlars, artisans, mechanics, clerks, teachers – were simply dumped in the countryside, left to fend for themselves and their dependants.<sup>32</sup>

Class background mattered a great deal in the socialist state, but ultimately the inability to earn a living was a far greater stigma. Destitute members of society, in other words, were treated like pariahs. The economy was in the doldrums, and the state wanted to reduce the number of people who represented a drain on its resources. In many parts of the country the most vulnerable categories of people were sent into exile. In Tangshan, the medium-sized city port of Hebei, tens of thousands of unemployed people and vagrants were removed.<sup>33</sup>

In Shanghai the authorities even envisaged reducing the population by one-third. As early as April 1968, all retired workers and those on sick leave were ordered back to the countryside without pension or medical support if they lacked the proper class credentials. A year and a half later, after more than 600,000 people had been deported, including students and other undesirable elements, a new plan proposed to increase the number of people earmarked for removal to a total of 3.5 million. Half of all medical workers were to be sent off, as well as all unemployed and retired people. Those suffering from a chronic illness were added to the list. Even prisons were to be relocated outside the city limits. The plan was never fully implemented, but for years the population of Shanghai stagnated around the 10 million mark.<sup>34</sup>

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Cadres who had strayed from the path were also to be re-educated in the countryside, and they were sent to May Seventh Cadre Schools. Much of the Cultural Revolution was fuelled by a vision first developed in Yan’an during the Second World War, when everybody had been asked to fuse with the collective in war and work alike, becoming simultaneously soldier, worker and student. On 7 May 1966, Mao had written to Lin Biao to extol the Yan’an model, encouraging people to learn alternative skills and contribute to production. Exactly two years later, to mark the occasion, Heilongjiang

province established a labour farm called the ‘May Seventh Cadre School’ in the countryside, where ‘capitalist roaders’, ‘revisionists’ and other wayward officials were to work, live and rehabilitate themselves. On 30 September, the Chairman gave the experiment his seal of approval, pronouncing that ‘sending vast numbers of cadres to work in the countryside provides them with an excellent second chance to study’. Less than a week later, the *People’s Daily* extolled the May Seventh Cadre School, calling on the whole country to emulate Heilongjiang’s example.<sup>35</sup>

Cadre schools appeared everywhere. Peking University, where teachers and cadres had been forced to move into dormitories, studying together under the watchful eye of the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams, joined the trend and selected a muddy stretch of reclaimed land near the Poyang Lake in Jiangxi province. It was a stark and desolate landscape, with vast expanses of wild grass evenly covered in yellow sand as far as the eye could see. Here, more than a thousand kilometres south of the capital, the propaganda teams could observe troublesome intellectuals and suspect cadres in a carefully controlled environment. Those who demonstrated their loyalty to the Chairman could be recalled to the city, while stubborn elements would be condemned to permanent exile. Only the most reliable teachers and cadres who had survived the campaign to cleanse the party ranks were allowed to remain on campus.

The rehabilitation centre in Jiangxi consisted of nothing but four temporary sheds in the middle of a wasteland. Everything had to be built from scratch, including more permanent housing, as bamboo posts were lashed together with wire and makeshift walls erected, made of woven strips of bamboo plastered with mud. Ropes were used to dry clothes. The roofs leaked, and washbasins had to be placed beneath the worst drips. To stay dry when it rained, people slept under plastic sheets tied to a bamboo frame. More permanent brick structures gradually appeared, each brick being cut with a spade from hard clay, mixed with water, forced into rectangular wooden moulds and then baked in a kiln.

The cadre school was run by the military, and everybody was enrolled into a squadron of ten people, ten squadrons, in turn, constituting a company. Discipline was strict, the work regime relentless at nine or ten hours a day, seven days a week. Company leaders always found new ways of testing people, assigning outdoor labour when it was raining or demanding that bricks be moved from one location to another for no good reason. They saw it as their duty to make life as miserable as possible, since otherwise the very goal of re-education through labour could not be achieved. Military drills were organised, sometimes in the middle of the night. There were also obligatory study sessions, when teachers and cadres assembled in the morning to study the Chairman’s thoughts.

Here were some of the country’s most eminent scientists, physicians, engineers and philosophers, far away from their laboratories and offices, forced to do hard physical labour, shovelling mud, baking bricks, collecting twigs or hauling manure. On one occasion, a mathematician trained in Cambridge and a physicist with a doctoral dissertation from Moscow University attempted to slaughter a pig. They botched the affair, the animal breaking free, spurting blood everywhere. Still, there was no lack of true believers, as some of the victims shared the conviction that they had to become more productive members of society. Yue Daiyun agreed with the goals of the propaganda team, and conceded that she ‘rarely felt resentment at the way we were treated’. Others welcomed a simple life away from the tribulations of the Cultural Revolution.

Not all showed such equanimity. Nie Yuanzi, her face sallow and expressionless, was no longer fêted as a rebel hero, but given the task of emptying heavy buckets of urine every morning. Her sworn enemy, Peng Peiyun, once the powerful assistant party secretary under the university’s president, was assigned the same strenuous work. The propaganda team was keen to destroy their power. In cadre schools across the country, leaders from all the factions that had appeared during the Cultural Revolution were crushed.<sup>36</sup>

Most cadre schools were completely cut off from the rest of society. There were occasional trips to local markets, or forays into town to purchase provisions and collect mail, but the exemplary workers, peasants and soldiers they were supposed to emulate were nowhere to be seen. Nor was all the hard labour they carried out particularly useful. They could not even sustain themselves, and cadre schools had to be heavily subsidised with regular rations of grain, edible oil, vegetables and meat.

Most of all, compared to the many batches of ordinary people and students deported to the countryside with no hope of ever returning to their homes, the government officials sent back to school were relatively sheltered. And their numbers were far smaller. In Gansu, by the spring of 1970, fewer than 20,000 people lived in cadre schools, representing roughly 5 per cent of all party officials. By comparison, half a million students were banished to the countryside. In Hebei, just over 32,000 cadres were undergoing re-education in the countryside. Like others across the nation, most of them were allowed to return to their posts in the autumn of 1970.<sup>37</sup>

## Preparing for War

Sparsely covered with birch trees and brushy undergrowth, Damansky Island is less than 2 kilometres long and at most 800 metres wide. Called Zhenbao in Chinese, or 'Treasure Island', it sits low in the Ussuri River that marks the riverine border between China and the Soviet Union. Manchurian red deer, which shed their reddish summer coat for thick brown-grey hair, sometimes roam across the frozen river. The island was the subject of a territorial dispute, and endless incidents flared up in the area, as border patrol guards, outfitted in white winter uniforms, would fight each other with boat hooks, bear spears and spiked sticks. On a few occasions, a column of lorries would pull up on the Chinese side of the river and hundreds of troops would dismount, warming up for a fight as martial music blared from loudspeakers.<sup>1</sup>

The clashes did not involve heavy weapons, but this all changed when simmering tensions reached a flashpoint in March 1969. On 2 March, in the early hours of the morning, dozens of armed Chinese soldiers crossed the ice and occupied the island, shooting at the border post on the other side of the river at point-blank range. Mortars from the People's Liberation Army shelled enemy positions. The crossfire lasted for several hours, until Soviet reinforcements arrived and deployed missile launchers to crush their opponents.

Two weeks later, on 15 March, thousands of troops clashed again on Damansky. But this time the Soviets were better prepared, deploying dozens of tanks and armoured vehicles to repulse the attack. Hundreds died in combat.

For months, China had prepared for battle in order to regain the initiative in the border conflict. The entire operation was supervised from the Capital West Hotel in Beijing. A special telephone line linked the hotel to the troops on the Ussuri River. Zhou Enlai made all the key decisions. But after the battle of 15 March, the Chairman intervened: 'We should stop here. Do not fight any more!' Mao had achieved his aim, which was to put the Soviet Union on notice and use the incident to ratchet up the tension at home.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as the confrontation was over, the propaganda machine started beating the war drum: 'Prepare for War!' became the motto of the day. The Chairman, never one to shy away from hyperbole, announced that the country should be on standby to 'fight a great war, an early war, and even a nuclear war'.<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks later, the long-awaited Ninth Party Congress opened in Beijing. At last, the Chairman was able to reverse the decisions made by the Eighth Party Congress in September 1956. Thirteen years earlier, the delegates had quietly dropped all references to the Socialist High Tide, Mao's failed attempt to rush the country into collectivisation in 1955. Half a year after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in February 1956, they had also deleted all references to Mao Zedong Thought from the constitution and denounced the cult of personality.

The Chairman used the militant atmosphere created by the border clashes to impose strict conditions of secrecy on the delegates, who were flown to the capital by night on specially chartered military planes. They were instructed not to communicate with anyone about the congress.<sup>4</sup>

Lin Biao delivered the main political report, drafted by Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan under close supervision from the Chairman. It praised the Cultural Revolution and promised unrelenting vigilance against class enemies. Zhou Enlai, in turn, gave a paean to 'the deputy supreme commander of our proletarian headquarters', asking that Lin Biao be officially named as Mao's successor. A new constitution laid down that 'Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought is the theoretical basis guiding the party's thinking.' Mao Zedong Thought was reaffirmed as the country's guiding ideology.

On the last day of the congress, the 1,500 delegates were asked to elect a new Central Committee. Voting was carefully manipulated. A list of candidates had been prepared, equal to the number of available positions, and all of them were guaranteed election unless their names were crossed out by more than half of the delegates. The clashes along the border served to strengthen a military bid for power, and more than a third of all candidates came from the army, navy and air force. Jiang Qing, together with the wives of Kang Sheng, Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai, was also among the new members, although a secret investigation was later launched to find out which ten delegates had failed to endorse her. But over the summer her Cultural Revolution Group began to wind down its operations, ceasing altogether in September 1969.<sup>5</sup>

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With Lin Biao at the height of his power, the country was militarised even further. In the months following the clashes at Damansky Island, the country was fully mobilised for war. But then, in the middle of August 1969, came retaliation. In Xinjiang, at the opposite end of a 7,000 kilometre border separating both empires, more than 300 Soviet soldiers backed by two helicopters and dozens of armoured vehicles launched a surprise attack, striking deep inside enemy territory and eliminating a Chinese frontier squadron.

The confrontations on Damansky Island earlier in March had unsettled the leadership in Moscow. It was alarmed at the prospect of the People's Liberation Army attempting a large-scale incursion into Soviet territory. Some hardliners within the Soviet party even argued for the need to eliminate the 'China threat'. *Red Star*, the main organ of the Soviet military, published an article promising to deal the 'modern adventurers' a crushing nuclear blow. Having reclaimed the initiative with their surgical strike in Xinjiang, the Soviets began hastening preparations for war. Five days later, in Washington, the Soviet embassy asked the Americans how they would react to a Russian attack on a Chinese nuclear facility. The US ignored them. All along, the official Soviet mouthpiece *Pravda* appealed to the world to understand how dangerous China had become. It seemed as if all-out war between the two nuclear powers was imminent.<sup>6</sup>

The Chairman was stunned. He had not anticipated that the Soviets would contemplate going to war. Unlike the disputed border in Manchuria, where the Ussuri and Amur rivers created a natural boundary, vast stretches of the frontier along the arid deserts of Xinjiang were only vaguely demarcated. The nuclear testing ground of Lop Nur was not far away. In addition, despite a relentless programme of colonisation resulting in millions of Chinese settlers being relocated in the region, the majority of people there were still Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Tadjiks and other ethnic groups, who resented attempts to collectivise their herds and longed for genuine independence. In 1962, at the end of Mao's Great Famine, more than 64,000 people, including families with children and their meagre possessions, had fled across the border into the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

Soviet troops in the region were not only far superior, but were backed up by medium-range missiles. Only a few years earlier, in January 1966, the Soviet Union had concluded a treaty of mutual assistance with Ulan Bator, stationing an army in Mongolia, which directly abutted Xinjiang.

The spectre of war hung over Beijing. Despite the slogan 'Prepare for War', the country was far from ready, damaged by years of chaos caused by the Cultural Revolution. Lin Biao now asked that military expenditure be doubled. On 28 August, the Central Committee ordered a military mobilisation in the provinces and regions bordering the Soviet Union and Mongolia. It put the country on red alert, demanding that the population be prepared for a large-scale Soviet invasion.

Behind the scenes, in a dramatic retreat from past intransigence, Beijing agreed to discuss the border issue with the Soviets. But even after Kosygin had made a number of diplomatic concessions designed to lower the tension, Lin Biao and Mao Zedong remained deeply suspicious. Moscow's peace gesture was seen as a smokescreen designed to cover a future attack. The panic was such that when, on 20 October, a Soviet delegation was scheduled to arrive in Beijing to discuss the border issue, all party and military leaders were ordered to leave the capital. Mao sought refuge in Wuhan. Only Zhou Enlai remained, moving into an underground command centre in the suburbs with the army's general staff. On 17 October, Lin Biao issued a 'Number One Order' from a bunker in Suzhou, putting all military units on high alert. One million soldiers, 4,000 planes and 600 ships moved to take up strategic positions across the country. On 20 October, nothing happened.<sup>8</sup>

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Although the transportation of whole categories of people had already started in September 1968, including families from bad class backgrounds, villagers without permission to reside in the city, workers on temporary contracts, retired people, invalids, young people and large numbers of cadres, the spectre of a Third World War was used to accelerate the removal of millions of people to the countryside. A drive was conducted to ferret out those who had returned from the countryside illegally, while the wives and children of employees sent to May Seventh Cadre Schools and the families of those sent to the countryside for permanent resettlement were now banished. In Guangdong and Fujian, long lines of refugees could be seen, clutching baskets and bags containing mosquito netting, enamel washbasins and cooking utensils.<sup>9</sup>

Those who remained behind were asked to prepare for war. In Shanghai and other cities, booklets were distributed to the population explaining the trajectory of bombs which were propelled forward by planes rather than dropped vertically; how to take cover in the event of a nuclear strike; how to dig trenches; how to shoot at an aircraft with a rifle; what part of a building to shelter in; how to give first aid; how to fight a fire; and how to recognise foreign combat aircraft. Hoardings appeared with the markings and silhouettes of Soviet and American aircraft and helicopters.<sup>10</sup>

Every city was soon pasted with anti-Soviet and anti-American posters. Cartoons on the Bund in Shanghai depicted Brezhnev poking his head through a flowery screen to engage in peace talks while secretly holding a match, ready to light a gigantic rocket gripped between his bare toes. Another showed President Nixon egging on his Soviet counterpart while covetously caressing a globe.<sup>11</sup>

Not everyone believed the propaganda. There was no lack of people who realised that the border skirmish had been used to ratchet up tension at home and corral the local population. One opinion survey in the city of Handan, Hebei, revealed that some residents wondered what all the fuss was about, since only a few shots had been exchanged. But others panicked. Among those who feared the onslaught of a Third World War, some fled to the countryside. Others stayed put, selling all their possessions to enjoy a final feast of wine and food in the countdown to Armageddon. Elsewhere in the province some villagers feared yet another requisition of their livestock and slaughtered all the pigs. In a few places the prospect of war sparked panic buying, as shops were emptied of batteries and candles.

A few rejoiced. Counter-revolutionary slogans were posted, predicting the fall of the communist party. In one county, an underground group issued a call to arms to the local population, asking that 'We must co-ordinate our movements with the United States and the Soviet Union in our attack on Beijing!' Here and there, flares went up, presumably to help the enemy in its advance. Some hotheads even volunteered to work for the enemy. One such was Feng Guiyuan, who defiantly declared that 'When troops from the Soviet Union come, I will go out there and welcome them.' Others started planning for life after communism. In Wanquan county, Ma Yu'e, the wife of a landlord, took her children to see the house that had been wrenched from them during land reform twenty years earlier.<sup>12</sup>

Sheer desperation also played a role. From her cave in Yan'an, Zhai Zhenhua, the once idealistic student who had emulated Lei Feng, now secretly wished for war. 'War brings disaster but also opportunity. I would rather die heroically on the battlefield than live the hopeless life I had been given. And if I didn't die, things in China would definitely change for the better after the war, I thought. This was crazy, of course, but I was living in a crazy time.'<sup>13</sup>

However, most people quite literally followed the drill. Factory workers, government employees and even schoolchildren were trained in civil defence. In Shanghai, children were seen parading in formation and throwing themselves on the ground, covering their eyes at the blast of a whistle. Another signal from their leader and they jumped up to resume their march, often with great relish. Others marched in time with dummy rifles. In Beijing, young people staged mock street battles with wooden guns, each of the combatants wearing pieces of paper on their chest to identify them as friend or foe. Soldiers instructed new recruits in how to handle firearms. Searchlight practices became frequent in the evening.<sup>14</sup>

Appeals went out for blood donations. But most of all, people were asked to contribute by digging trenches and air-raid shelters. The Chairman called on the people to 'deeply dig caves, extensively store grain'. Already in June 1965, Mao had proposed that 'the best way would be to dig shelters underneath houses, roughly a metre deep. If we connect all the houses with tunnels, and each household digs its own shelter, the state will not have to incur any expenses.' In an apocalyptic vision reminiscent of the battle of Stalingrad, when the Germans fought over individual streets in ferocious hand-to-hand combat with the Russians, he wanted each city to be ready for street fighting. Speaking to a foreign visitor in June 1970, he explained that all buildings would be linked by a network of tunnels, as the people would retreat into shelters to hide, study, practise shooting and harass the enemy.<sup>15</sup>

In the capital the Chairman got what he wanted. For more than a year, Beijing was covered in mounds of earth and 'almost unbelievable numbers' of bricks, as a frenzied wave of construction took place. Inside department stores and government offices, deep holes were dug, with access to a sprawling underground world of narrow corridors and bunkers served by electric lifts. On Tiananmen Square, huge hoardings went up, hiding cranes and pile drivers, as the army was entrusted with the mammoth task of linking up the Great Hall of the People with the maze of tunnels.<sup>16</sup>

Where construction work was supervised by engineers and the military, rapid progress was made, and eventually the capital boasted an underground city covering an area of 85 square kilometres. It came with restaurants, clinics, schools, theatres and factories, and apparently even had a roller-skating rink. Some shelters had gas-proof hatches and radiation-shielding steel doors 30 centimetres thick. Grain and oil were also stored underground, while mushrooms that required little light were grown on special subterranean farms.

Some of the excavations were carried out in conjunction with work on the metro, which had started a few years earlier. On 1 October 1969, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, trial operations were started on the first line, which ran from military barracks in the suburbs to the Beijing Railway Station.<sup>17</sup>

Accidents were frequent, especially where desultory citizens followed the commands of local cadres with no knowledge of geology or even basic engineering. The Yan'an spirit, after all, hailed the collective wisdom of the masses, while specialist knowledge was scorned as bourgeois. In many smaller projects, the excavated soil was removed in wheelbarrows and emptied in the streets. Heavy rain turned it to sludge, causing bicycles to slip, carts to tip over and gutters to clog up and overflow. In Puxi, a district in Shanghai, eight streets were lined with over a hundred heaps of excavated earth, debris and putrefying waste, weighing an estimated 30,000 tonnes. With everything mud-splattered, it resembled a clean-up operation in the aftermath of a devastating typhoon. Similar scenes could be seen in many streets all across the nation.<sup>18</sup>



Since geological surveys were carried out only on major construction projects, there were plenty of cases of damage to housing. In the Huangpu district, dominated by the Shanghai International Settlement until it was handed back to the republican government in 1943, the foundations of a dozen houses were so badly undermined by tunnelling that they caved in or were ripped open. Fatal accidents occurred when badly reinforced shelters collapsed, burying some of the workers alive. This happened regularly. Since schoolchildren were also compelled to take part in the digging, they sometimes ended up being suffocated to death when excavation sites caved in.<sup>19</sup>

People were also asked to contribute bricks. In a reminder of the Great Leap Forward, when improvised backyard furnaces appeared across the country in response to a call to double the steel output, makeshift brick kilns went up in every town and city. The idea was that the excavated mud could be turned into bricks, which could then be used to reinforce the underground shelters. In Beijing, where mud kilns appeared next to giant piles of earth, there was a quota of thirty bricks per person. Perhaps predictably, the bricks had anti-Soviet slogans printed on them. In Shanghai, as one report enthused, ‘people took the initiative to tear down their own chicken sheds and fish tanks, and some even took the bricks used to prop up their beds and furniture, reinforce their walls, elevate their stoves or pave their floors’. People also donated coal to operate the improvised kilns, which apparently produced 7 million bricks – not counting those salvaged or scavenged from existing structures.<sup>20</sup>

Fatalities were less keenly inventoried than bricks, although they must have been frequent, as some of the kilns, built of sand, stone, fire clay or bricks, keeled over or exploded. When Shanghai tried to establish a new record in brick production in the run-up to National Day in 1971, one of these devices in the Putuo district imploded, burying or injuring twelve people. Makeshift kilns posed a lethal hazard until the mid-1970s.<sup>21</sup>

Beijing led a competition to build the country’s most extensive underground network. Shanghai did not lag far behind, with an elaborate honeycomb of subterranean tunnels that could reputedly hold 2.5 million people. In the six main cities of Hebei province, more than a million people could be sheltered. By the end of 1970, the country’s seventy-five largest cities boasted enough underground shelters to hold 60 per cent of their populations. Most were dug by hand.<sup>22</sup>

Strategic mountains were riddled with tunnels, some of them wide enough for several buses. The one blasted through Langmao Mountain, just outside Shandong’s provincial capital of Jinan, was 8 metres wide and 7 metres high, leading to an underground storage facility designed to hold more than 10,000 tonnes of grain. Near by, deep inside Wanling Mountain, an underground parking lot could accommodate 200 military vehicles. Even in barren Gansu province, deep inside the hinterland, close to a million square metres were dug by the end of 1970. In Yan’an, so remote and isolated from the rest of the country that Mao had picked the place as his wartime base in the fight against Japan decades earlier, Zhai Zhenhua and some of the best workers from the village had to shovel their way through a loess mountain.<sup>23</sup>

It was a gargantuan effort, and most of it was wasted. In a carefully choreographed visit to the capital’s shelters in November 1970, the US journalist Edgar Snow was taken through narrow corridors to a brand new bunker, where he received a telephone call from Prince Sihanouk, also in Beijing after his overthrow in a military coup in his native Cambodia. But the war never took place. Once the warren had been completed it quickly faded into obscurity, colonised by fungi and vermin. Eventually many of the tunnels were blocked up. The network was deemed a military secret, and access prohibited to the very people who had built it with their own bare hands.<sup>24</sup>

Almost every adult and child in the country took part in building shelters. The war scare helped create much-needed national unity after all the political infighting of the Cultural Revolution. It kept people busy. Evacuating the cities, digging trenches and stockpiling food helped conquer factionalism.

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Always a fastidious student of Stalin, the Chairman realised that one of his erstwhile master’s most serious mistakes – besides his failure to spot Khrushchev as his future nemesis – was the lack of a comprehensive evacuation programme in the event of a large-scale invasion. Only after the Germans had launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, sending a hundred divisions across the border in the largest military operation in the history of warfare, was a Council for Evacuation appointed. In an unprecedented logistical undertaking, more than 1,500 of the most important factories were dismantled and shipped eastwards. As trains moved 2.5 million soldiers to the front over the summer, industrial machinery was taken to the east on their return. Finding sufficient buildings in which to house the evacuated factories – in the Urals, Central Asia and Siberia – was another challenge, and much of the material remained locked up in warehouses until the spring of 1942. It was an immense task, but it represented only a fraction of the 32,000 factories captured by the Germans. Despite their belated efforts, the Russians lost 40 per cent of their population and much of their industry.<sup>25</sup>

Mao was determined not to make the same mistake. Before Khrushchev’s downfall in October 1964, as tensions between China and the Soviet Union peaked with endless belligerent statements from both sides, the Chairman wondered whether Moscow could attack his country. ‘Is it possible that the Soviet Union might dispatch its troops to occupy Xinjiang, Heilongjiang or even Inner Mongolia?’ At the same time, the Americans were escalating their involvement in the Vietnam War. Mao’s answer was to build a Third Front in the hinterland, far away from the land and sea borders most likely to come under attack in the event of war.<sup>26</sup>

The Third Front aimed at nothing less than the building of a complete industrial infrastructure in the country’s interior. Between 1964 and 1980 a colossal programme was carried out to move some of the country’s factories to the most remote and inhospitable areas in the hinterland, far away from the populated plains in the north of the country and along the coastline. Sichuan province, often referred to as a natural fortress with its mountain chains rising high above its fertile basin, was the centre of the Third Front. But other mountainous regions, stretching from Shaanxi and Hubei down to the elevated plateau straddling Yunnan and Guizhou, were also selected for development. In some cases entire factories were dismantled and moved, but more often than not only a portion of an urban plant’s machinery and workforce was relocated inland.<sup>27</sup>

Other facilities were built from scratch. At Panzhihua, a forbidding and barren region with large mineral resources in the south of Sichuan, a huge iron and steel complex emerged after 1965. Tens of thousands of construction workers were sent from all over the country, to dig coalmines, lay rail tracks and build power plants. The railway alone, tunnelling through hundreds of kilometres from the new steel city to both Chengdu and Kunming, cost 3.3 billion yuan. One member of the Youth Corps was part of the first contingent to move to Panzhihua in 1965: ‘We didn’t have anything, not even coal to cook with, and the hills were covered only in scrub brush that was hardly fit for burning . . . We wandered around with just one set of clothes, a wide-brimmed hat to protect us from the sun, and a canteen. As for transportation, we had nothing but our own two feet.’ But no amount of hardship could stand in the way of the Third Front. The impatient Chairman told the Ministry of Mining and Industry that ‘I cannot sleep until we build the Panzhihua iron and steel mill.’ Concerned about the lack of capital, he donated the royalties of the Little Red Book and his other writings to the cause.<sup>28</sup>

In 1965, the hand of the state redrew the boundaries of the new city, bringing under its administrative purview more than 80,000 villagers from several surrounding communes. They were worked hard. The mortality rate reached an astonishing 13 per cent. A harsh environment, military discipline and the great haste with which the plan was carried out were only part of the problem. As one historian of the Third Front has noted, in Panzhihua and elsewhere there was barely any preparatory work. Sites were simultaneously selected, designed and built, in an ad hoc manner that demanded constant



remedial measures to correct costly mistakes.<sup>29</sup>

From 1966 to 1968, much of the work on the Third Front ground to a halt with the Cultural Revolution, and transport disruptions intermittently stopped work at Panzhihua. But a new wave of investment came after the March 1969 clash at Damansky. Hundreds of thousands of temporary workers were used in human-wave tactics to link other parts of the hinterland through a railway grid. At the height of the campaign, as the regime used the war scare to whip the workforce into a frenzy, up to two labourers were used for every metre of track.

Across the hinterland, up in the mountains, hundreds of factories were built. The Number Two Automobile Plant in Shiyan, deep inside western Hubei, received help from more than 140 factories and research institutes. Many plants related to the Number Two were scattered across the region, producing tyres, rubber, paint and automobile parts. Some were located in narrow valleys, others in giant caves hollowed out from the mountains. Transportation was often impossible, despite the new railway lines.<sup>30</sup>

The Third Front brought some 600,000 workers to the region, pushing the total population to 4 million. The pressure was unbearable. In Shiyan itself, a mere 500 shop assistants had to serve 200,000 people. They followed a capricious routine, selling only a limited range of items on any given day. On a Monday morning, for instance, they would sell plastic shoes, but only in size 38. Customers wanting the next size up had to come back the following day. Those who managed to obtain a pair were considered lucky. Shortages were such that some workers in the new factories had no shoes at all. Bulbs, thermos flasks, towels, socks, tinned food and washbasins were also in short supply. There was only enough cable to connect 6 per cent of the telephones. In the main street of Yuan'an, a county seat, a single bulb dangled disconsolately along a stretch of a hundred metres. But workers at the Third Front still enjoyed priority over local villagers. Those living in proximity to the new factories saw their already paltry living standards plunge even further, as everything was drained away to fuel the war effort. Some hamlets did not even have matches, and others lacked the nails required to repair simple water wheels.<sup>31</sup>

Food was also an issue, compounded by the deliberately remote location of many of the Third Front factories. In some canteens, for instance near the Number Two Automobile Plant, the diet varied between plain dumplings and radish soup. Vegetables were in short supply, and often the workers had nothing but a little soy sauce to add to their buns or dumplings. Meat was a luxury, rarely seen except to celebrate the Lunar New Year.<sup>32</sup>

Western Hubei was part of the remote hinterland, but similar problems afflicted even more developed parts of the country. The First Front was the border and coastal areas, stretching from the industrial belt in Manchuria to major coastal cities such as Tianjin and Shanghai on the east coast. The Second Front was the rest of the country, and it, too, was pressed into war preparation, as factories from the cities relocated no more than a few hundred kilometres inland. In parts of Handan, less than 500 kilometres from Tianjin in southern Hebei, the workers in new factories only ever ate a thin broth with a few pickles on the side. 'What we earn is socialist money, what we eat is capitalist food,' some of them observed, commenting on the cost of the food in the canteen. There were no shops, as the factories were placed strategically deep inside the countryside. The workers bartered with local villagers for cigarettes. More substantial purchases, for instance a pair of shoes, demanded an expedition to the county seat some 30 kilometres away.<sup>33</sup>

The scale of the Third Front was staggering, as about 1,800 factories were set up in the hinterland to prepare for war. As one scholar has noted, since about two-thirds of the state's industrial investment went to the project between 1964 and 1971, it constituted the main economic policy of the Cultural Revolution. At best, it put in place the rudiments of a transportation system in the hinterland. But even a well-planned and carefully executed project on this gargantuan scale would have been extremely costly, given its remote and scattered location as well as the difficult terrain up in the mountains and along narrow valleys. It was done in great haste, at breakneck speed, in a climate of impending apocalypse. 'Nearly every project about which we have information ran into substantial additional costs and delays because of inadequate preparatory work,' writes one specialist on the Third Front. The first furnace of molten steel was eventually smelted in Panzhihua in July 1970, but three other steel mills were still under construction in the 1980s. The design of the mill at Jiuquan, in Gansu province, was changed six times, but despite more than a billion yuan in investment it produced steel only after twenty-seven years. Vast amounts were wasted on other projects. Several economists have calculated that the Third Front cost the country hundreds of billions in forgone output alone, as the high priority of the Third Front starved other parts of the country of much-needed investment. It is probably the biggest example of wasteful capital allocation made by a one-party state in the twentieth century. In terms of economic development, it was a disaster second only to the Great Leap Forward.<sup>34</sup>

## Learning from Dazhai

On the last day of the Ninth Congress in April 1969, delegates were asked to elect a new Central Committee. Among the successful candidates was an illiterate villager with deeply tanned, leathery skin and week-old stubble. His name was Chen Yonggui, and all the delegates would have recognised his trademark white terrycloth turban, which he wore tightly wrapped around his head to ward off the sun. Six years earlier, after his village had been destroyed by a flood, he had refused all government aid, instead encouraging his brigade to transform itself into a grain depot by sheer strength of will. Dazhai, located on a sterile plateau of loess in north China, soon attracted Mao Zedong's attention. On 26 December 1964, to mark Mao's birthday, Chen Yonggui was invited to share a meal with the Chairman in Beijing, where the slogan 'In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai' was launched. This saying was to define agricultural policy for the next fifteen years, much as the Third Front determined what happened in industry.

Dazhai illustrated one of the Chairman's most cherished notions, namely that man could overcome nature. Most of all, it stood for self-reliance. Chen Yonggui insisted on the principle of the 'three no's', refusing state grain, state funds and relief materials.

Self-reliance was not a new notion. Already during the Great Leap Forward, the Chairman had seen the substitution of labour for capital as the key to rapid industrialisation. The country's greatest asset, he had declared, was a workforce numbered in the hundreds of millions of people. The people, after all, were the only motive force in history. Collectively, so propaganda went, they could accomplish in a matter of months what their forefathers had done in thousands of years. Villagers became footsoldiers in a giant army, herded into people's communes where their lives were organised along military lines, at the beck and call of local cadres.

The experiment resulted in a catastrophe, but the notion of self-reliance flourished, especially after scores of large-scale projects were cancelled and the Soviet Union froze transfers of high-end military technology. By 1964, China had few friends, and the country's isolation only deepened two years later with the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Self-reliance became a convenient rationale for leaving people to their own devices. They were told to rely on their own strength, as abundant labour, once again, was meant to replace scarce capital. Dazhai became a model, as villagers were asked to transform arid land into fertile fields – without aid from the state.

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Surrounded by dried gullies and steep hills in an isolated corner of impoverished Shanxi, some 350 kilometres south-west of Beijing, Dazhai became the Chairman's model commune. The village drew hundreds of thousands of visitors a year, many of them keen to absorb the revolutionary lessons of self-reliance, struggle against nature and radical egalitarianism. There were endless posters showing Chen Yonggui working in the fields among the villagers, transforming the barren mountainside into terraced farmland. There were newspaper articles, magazine stories and feature films, following the villagers through their daily routines, as they planted apple, walnut and mulberry trees, raised silkworms and honey bees, looked after chickens and fat pigs, all without government subsidies. In Dazhai, the propaganda showed, every villager was provided with free education and medical care. By 1968, some 1.3 million people had visited Dazhai, which now had an auditorium, a special dining hall and a hotel with real plumbing to accommodate all the tourists – including foreign dignitaries and high-powered delegations from fraternal countries.<sup>1</sup>

Dazhai, in effect, was a return to the Great Leap Forward. Everything in Dazhai was collectivised. The very slogan that had launched the Great Leap Forward – 'Greater, Faster, Better and More Economical' – was resurrected by the *People's Daily* in its call to follow the 'Dazhai Road' in February 1964. The frenzy that had accompanied the Great Leap Forward was reproduced in the Dazhai model, as villagers were expected to work not only during the day, but through the night as well, come rain or snow. Material incentives were spurned as capitalist, replaced by political zeal and endless propaganda, as loudspeakers were installed at work sites to broadcast music and songs while the villagers took a break. Much as people were forced to tackle one infrastructure project after another during the Great Leap Forward, from water conservancy projects during the winter to steel production over the summer, the Dazhai model enjoined them to move hills, dig tunnels and build canals in selfless dedication to the greater good. 'Battle Hard for Three Years to Change the Face of China' was the slogan in 1958; in 1964 it was 'Work Hard, Diligently and with Extra Energy, and Build our Village into a Dazhai-Like One in Three Years'. 'Learn from Dazhai' was spelled out with large stones on thousands of hillsides across the country, the same way huge slogans praising the Great Leap Forward had been carved into mountainsides years before. Chen Yonggui himself marched under the banner of the Great Leap Forward, making sure that every portion of private property was collectivised. There were no private plots in Dazhai, even though they had been reintroduced across the country after 1961.

But Dazhai remained no more than a vision during the two first years of the Cultural Revolution. In 1958 the Chairman had ensured that the party stood united behind the Great Leap Forward. In 1966, he was busy undermining his colleagues, unleashing the people against his real or imagined enemies within the party ranks.

Not that there was a lack of true believers among the Red Guards. The Cultural Revolution, after all, had started off with a campaign against 'Khrushchev-like revisionists' who were 'taking the capitalist road'. During red August, when Red Guards appeared in all major cities, some radical students had gone to the surrounding countryside to attack all remnants of 'capitalism'. In Nanjing, for instance, on 18 August 1966, the very day Lin Biao appeared in Tiananmen Square to call for the destruction of the old world, they forcibly collectivised all private plots belonging to farmers in the suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

More violence followed in the ensuing months, but in the countryside it generally remained confined to villages located close to the main towns and cities. In Zhengding, Gao Yuan and his friends were marched by the military to a cluster of hamlets about an hour away along the main road, only to find that the local leaders had already taken all bad elements to task. Former landlords, rich peasants and other class enemies had to get up earlier than everybody else and sweep the streets. 'They were easily recognisable, for they all wore black armbands with their status described in white characters.'<sup>3</sup>

In other parts of the countryside, Red Guards vandalised temples, felled sacred trees and burned old almanacs, together with anything else that smacked of superstition. Here too, however, the majority of villages that experienced revolutionary violence were located near cities, along railway lines or adjacent to major roads. Vast swathes of the countryside were only superficially affected by the turmoil gripping towns and cities.

The Chairman himself realised that the revolution could be carried out only if a steady supply of food reached the cities. He had no intention of turning the countryside upside down. On 14 September 1966 the regime limited the Cultural Revolution to county seats and larger cities, and no students or Red Guards were allowed to foment disorder in the villages. As Zhou Enlai put it to a delegation of Red Guards, 'we have to carry out revolution, but we

also have to produce, otherwise what will we eat?'<sup>4</sup>

Still, as large parts of the country descended into civil war in 1967, members of all factions tried to recruit more combatants from the surrounding countryside. In Shuangfeng, Hunan, some villagers were asked to converge on the county seat and take to task the royalist faction. They were paid 20 cents in addition to their usual work points. Many cheered wildly and dressed in their best clothes, as if they were going to a festival. They took their savings with them. Once they had turned up to denounce the party committee, they started drifting away. Some went shopping for a new towel or a small mirror.<sup>5</sup>

In other parts of Hunan, the factional fighting spilled over into the countryside with more tragic results. As we have seen, on 10 August 1967 the Cultural Revolution Group overturned the verdict pronounced earlier against a loose coalition of rebels in Changsha. They were called the Xiang River Group, and had supporters throughout the province. A few days later, invigorated by recognition from Beijing, their followers in Daoxian county managed to deal a crushing blow to their opponents, a powerful group backed by local officials and the militia. Violence followed in the countryside, as members of the defeated faction spread rumours of an impending apocalypse. They alleged that the Xiang River Group consisted mainly of bad elements, including the sons and daughters of former landlords, rich peasants and counter-revolutionaries, who were about to rise in a rebellion closely coordinated with Chiang Kai-shek, set to attack the mainland with his nationalist troops. In the following weeks, close to 5,000 people were butchered for their wrong class background. Some of the victims were mere infants. Daoxian was exceptional, but according to one specialist on collective killings in the countryside, during the Cultural Revolution more than 400,000 people were systematically exterminated in villages across the country. The perpetrators were not young Red Guards, but neighbours killing neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this violence was confined to a small number of provinces, mainly Guangdong, Guangxi and Hunan. And even there, many villages merely went through the routine of holding denunciation rallies of bad elements, who were paraded through the streets with dunces' caps, rather than organising systematic killings under the supervision of the local militia. Compared to the Great Leap Forward, when tens of millions of people had been beaten, worked and starved to death, the first years of the Cultural Revolution largely bypassed the countryside.

But villagers did not simply sit back idly and watch the chaos unfold in the cities. They, too, had a long list of grievances. Foremost among these was the radical collectivisation of the Great Leap Forward. Bricks, furniture and tools had been commandeered in the rush to build collective canteens. In some people's communes almost every form of private property had been abolished, including the clothes on people's backs. Pots and pans were confiscated to prevent villagers from preparing meals outside the canteens. Entire rows of houses were destroyed, to make fertiliser, build dormitories, relocate villagers, straighten roads, make room for a better future or even punish their occupants. Household implements and farming tools were thrown into backyard furnaces to increase the country's steel output, producing nothing but useless heaps of slag. Livestock had declined precipitously, not only because animals were slaughtered for the export market but also because they died of disease and hunger. Burial sites were flattened to make space for more agriculture, with headstones used for irrigation projects. In order to extract compliance from an exhausted workforce, local cadres resorted to coercion and systematic violence.

Even after the power of the people's communes over villagers had been weakened in the wake of Mao's Great Famine, villagers continued to resent the state's monopoly of the sale of grain. They sought to regain control over their own harvest. They wished to own the land. They longed for a return to freedom of movement, curtailed by the introduction of the household registration system in 1955. They wanted to trade.

In parts of the countryside the chaos of the Cultural Revolution provided villagers with an opportunity to reclaim some of the freedoms they had lost under communism. Since most government officials were embroiled in the political turmoil emanating from the capital, some of them fighting for their own survival, few systematic surveys of the countryside were carried out, but revealing glimpses can be gleaned from the party archives. A comprehensive survey of thirty counties across Shaanxi province showed that more than two-thirds of all local markets operated without any formal supervision. The state had simply melted away. The scale of the trading that took place in parts of the countryside could be enormous. In Yinzhen and Sanqiao, two villages a mere stone's throw away from the provincial capital, the black market in timber alone amounted to some 30,000 yuan a day. Windows, doors and coffins were sold in so brisk and lucrative a fashion that the commerce blocked traffic. Teams of up to a hundred villagers cut down trees in the mountains, operating entirely outside the state plan. The trend had started in the summer of 1966, as the Cultural Revolution kept the local authorities busy.<sup>7</sup>

In the county seat of Yaoxian, over 10,000 people went to market each day, as streets were crowded with the hustle and bustle of traders. Some of this was allowed, but large quantities of rationed items were also sold, in flagrant contravention of the state monopoly on grain, including an estimated 2.5 tonnes of sweet potatoes and several hundred kilos of peanuts a day. Up to eighty bicycles changed hands on any market day. Dozens of itinerant pedlars and local traders operated without any permit. In Fuping county some markets were entirely unregulated, as unlicensed doctors, itinerant dentists and private butchers offered their services for a fee. There was a lively market in joss paper, outlawed in 1966, not to mention batteries, bulbs, dyes and coal.<sup>8</sup>

In Fuping, as elsewhere, the black market had thrived during Mao's Great Famine, but vanished in the following years, as the economy slowly recovered. It reappeared in parallel with the Cultural Revolution, as the transportation system was stretched to the limit by Red Guards, choking off the local economy. But instead of trading on the sly, vanishing at the first sight of a police agent, many black marketeers had now grown bold, openly resisting arrest. Market inspectors were powerless to intervene, overwhelmed by crowds of sympathetic onlookers who gathered as soon as they questioned one of the traders. Some pedlars banded together, resisting any attempt by government officials to interrupt their trade. In Baoji, an irate mob beat to death one supervisor.<sup>9</sup>

Shaanxi was a poor province in the hinterland, but similar activities also thrived in the middle of coastal cities in the grip of the Cultural Revolution. In Guangzhou, entire underground factories were dedicated to the black market. The merchandise offered went far beyond rationed or forbidden goods such as grain and incense. Anyone with sufficient cash could buy petrol, gold, weapons, ammunition, detonators and dynamite.<sup>10</sup>

People in the countryside also used the political turmoil to clamour for larger private plots. Evidence, again, is difficult to come by, but in the spring of 1967 some cultivators in Dingbian county, Shaanxi, doubled their private holdings. Each household was normally allowed to keep only a few animals, but here too farmers pushed their luck, acquiring flocks of up to fifty sheep. In Ankang, some villagers left the people's communes altogether, striking out on their own or seeking their fortune in the city. The trend was significant enough in some villages to amount to decollectivisation.<sup>11</sup>

Decollectivisation was not limited to a few isolated places. In Gansu too, some people's communes were broken up, while villagers used their newfound freedom to double their private plots and expand their livestock. In parts of Jiangsu province, villagers demanded that temples and ancestral halls confiscated by the state be returned. In Shanxi some people divided up all collective property, slaughtering livestock and selling the meat on the private market. So worried was the central government that in February 1967 the *People's Daily* enjoined the population to be vigilant against counter-revolutionary forces in the countryside who were seeking to 'destroy the socialist economy' and 'seize power from the hands of the revolutionary people'. What was at stake was spring ploughing, one of the most important activities in the countryside. Whole regions had lost interest in the sowing season. Across Guanzhong, a fertile region along the lower valley of the Wei River, the local cadres were so powerless that the army had to intervene.



They even printed 6 million leaflets and scattered them by plane, here and elsewhere in Shaanxi, enjoining the population to return to collective farming.<sup>12</sup>

But the party was not about to do battle with the peasants. In March 1959, in response to reports that people in the countryside were hoarding grain, the Chairman had ordered that up to a third of the crop be seized, far above previous rates of procurement. He demanded that regions that failed to fulfil their quota be reported. Mao even made an extra 16,000 lorries available to carry out the task. 'He who strikes first prevails, he who strikes last fails' became the motto of the day, as cadres rushed to reach the grain before the villagers could eat it. Forced requisitions were one reason behind the famine that ensued.<sup>13</sup>

Eight years later, in May 1967, villagers were once again reported to be hiding grain. But the Chairman did not make the same mistake. He turned weakness into a strength, demanding that grain be stored widely in the countryside, increasing self-reliance among the villagers. As he put it, 'When peasants fail to report the crop fully and hide the grain, they are storing the wealth among the people.' Zhou Enlai even added that 'peasants will always be peasants', explaining that 'every time the situation improves a little, they move back towards capitalism . . . They have been working on their own for thousands of years, whereas collectivisation is only a few years old, so the influence of the individual economy is very big.' The regime did not impose higher requisitions, but instead reduced the amount of grain that could be sold back to the countryside. Self-reliance, in the spirit of Dazhai, meant that the state would not help with extra grain.<sup>14</sup>

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The countryside's turn came in 1968. Where revolutionary committees took over, order was soon restored. In Zhejiang, the Twentieth Army carried the day, closely supported by Wu Faxian, commander-in-chief of the air force and protégé of Lin Biao. The military ran the province from January 1968 onwards, purging countless numbers of people who had sided with the opposition.<sup>15</sup>

One of their first acts was to impose the Dazhai model. In order to 'thoroughly smash the evil plot by China's Khrushchev to restore capitalism in the countryside', the Twentieth Army sent a delegation of a hundred cadres to learn from Chen Yonggui in Shanxi. They, in turn, spread the spirit of self-reliance to every people's commune in the province. Posters went up, followed by newspaper articles, radio announcements and documentary films. War was declared on capitalism in the countryside.<sup>16</sup>

Over the next two years, a further 30,000 cadres and farmers were sent to Dazhai, all expenses paid. Many came back fully converted. By the end of 1969, more than 200 villages were hailed as model collectives. Zhejiang, like other provinces, acquired its own Dazhai, called Nanbao. The village was flattened by a flood in July 1969, but instead of relying on state handouts, the people from Nanbao, under the leadership of party secretary Li Jinrong, fought back. They rebuilt their houses, repaired the paddy fields and went all out to achieve economic independence. On 3 June 1970 the *People's Daily* praised Nanbao as a paragon of the principle that 'man can conquer nature'. More than 1.6 million people from Zhejiang alone came to visit Nanbao.

But some places got carried away. In their eagerness to recollectivise the economy, some cadres abolished private plots and even slaughtered private animals. Across the province, a quarter of all production teams reverted to the radical collectivisation of the Great Leap Forward by handing over responsibility for accounting to the brigade, the second tier of organisation in the countryside, placed between the people's commune and the team. This meant that the villagers lost control over income distribution. In some counties this was true for an astounding 80 per cent of all production teams. Simply gathering firewood or raising a buffalo was now denounced as 'capitalist'.<sup>17</sup>

Similar scenes could be observed in other parts of the country, as the military forced through the Dazhai model from 1968 onwards. In Gansu province, where Wang Feng and Liu Lantao were accused of having followed the 'capitalist road', private plots covering a total surface of more than 77,000 hectares were returned to the collectives, equivalent to roughly a third of all private holdings. In some counties, for instance Linzhao, Yumen and Subei, 'all private plots have been entirely taken back'. In some villages every tree and household animal was once again returned to collective hands.<sup>18</sup>

With the wave of recollectivisation came the usual modes of popular resistance, as farmers tried to slaughter their cattle and fell the trees before these could be taken from them. As news spread that the people's communes were attacking the 'evil wind of capitalism', villagers chased their pigs between mudbrick houses, their screams echoing through the streets. In Hunan, 'every courtyard became a slaughterhouse and every man's hands were bloody', as the villagers secretly smoked and salted the meat, stowing it away in earthenware jars.<sup>19</sup>

There are examples from other provinces. In Longyao county, Hebei, private plots only ever accounted for 6 per cent of all holdings, but by 1969 every last bit of land was grabbed back by the collectives. In Zhengding county, where Gao Yuan and his friends had done battle during the Cultural Revolution, in the summer of 1968 the entire countryside seemed to revert to the Great Leap Forward. Villagers who kept a pig or a sheep were denounced as 'capitalists', and all incentives to produce fertiliser were abolished. Every tree was deemed collective property. In parts of the province, responsibility for many key decisions was moved from the villagers to the larger collective. Sideline occupations, traditionally pursued by villagers in their spare time, were banned. A few cadres went so far as to confiscate all tools that did not contribute directly to the collective economy.<sup>20</sup>

With recollectivisation came a renewed emphasis on grain for the state, as 'Take Grain as the Key Link' became the main slogan. As in the days of the Great Leap Forward, everyone in the countryside was enjoined to produce grain. Alternative crops, whether or not they were better suited to the terrain, were abandoned. Fruit trees, tea bushes and medicinal plants were cut down. Vegetables were spurned. Prairies better suited to grazing were converted to cropland, sometimes after the cattle had been slaughtered. Plots with thin topsoil were covered with vast amounts of fertiliser. No matter how barren or inhospitable the land, hard work would conquer nature, and grain would be wrenched from the earth.<sup>21</sup>

Terraced fields appeared in the most unlikely places. Much as Chen Yonggui had filled ravines and terraced slopes in Dazhai to produce more grain, the country was to 'Get Grain from the Mountaintops, Get Grain from the Lakes'. Neither climate nor topography mattered, as lakes were filled, forests cleared and deserts reclaimed in desperate attempts to emulate Dazhai, from the Mongolian steppes to the swamps of Manchuria. Dogmatic uniformity was imposed across the country. In one extreme example of slavish emulation, local cadres even decided to build hills on a flat plain – simply so that they could be terraced like Dazhai.<sup>22</sup>

The campaign intensified after Chen Yonggui had been elected to the Central Committee, and reached its peak between August 1969 and September 1971. The Dazhai model was now linked to the war effort, as every region was pressured to increase its yield and store the surplus.

In Yan'an, Zhai Zhenhua had to help build a terraced field against the loess mountain. It kept the villagers busy all year round, except when the soil was frozen in winter. In Chongqing, a woman remembered how she and the other villagers were forced to open up wastelands in the mountains for cultivation. Nobody resisted for fear of being denounced. 'So we built terraces on the mountain, and carried earth and fertiliser. On every spare metre of earth, we tried to grow grain. But the mountain was never suitable for growing grain. It's only good for trees.'<sup>23</sup>

Terraces were built on steep slopes, regardless of the erosion caused by rain and floods. Some hillsides were cut down straight to the bedrock. Others collapsed at the slightest downpour and had to be maintained all year round, demanding ever greater amounts of topsoil.

Grassy plains, too, were converted, although many suffered from salinisation, caused when dry earth is artificially irrigated. Lack of rainfall allows the soluble salts contained in the irrigated water to accumulate in the soil, severely reducing its fertility. Here is how one enemy of the state, sent to the gulag to reclaim wasteland, described the fields of Ningxia province:

On the land before me abandoned fields stretched in all directions. Now covered with a thick layer of salt, they looked like dirty snowfields, or like orphans dressed in mourning clothes. They had been through numerous storms since being abandoned, but you could still see the scars of plough tracks running across their skin. Man and nature together had been flogged with whips here: the result of ‘Learn from Dazhai’ was to create a barren land, on whose alkaline surface not a blade of grass would grow.<sup>24</sup>

In the Bashang prairie near Zhangjiakou, too, sandstorms turned great stretches of grassland into an expanse of brown sand. Further away from the capital, in Qinghai province, some 670,000 hectares of green pastures were converted into cropland. Desertification soon degraded the environment beyond recovery.<sup>25</sup>

Lakes were drained, rivers dammed and wetlands reclaimed, all in the name of Dazhai. In Hubei, hundreds of lakes vanished. The largest one, lying between Hubei and Hunan, was depleted from an original 560,000 hectares to 282,000. In Yunnan, the Dianchi Lake, China’s sixth largest, sheltered by a mountain range dotted with temples, pagodas and pavilions, with corridors and caves chiselled from the rocks by Daoist monks in the nineteenth century, was taken in hand by hundreds of thousands of people, mobilised by the army to fill the wetlands in the spring of 1970. Boulders were blasted from the mountains and dumped into the lake in an effort to turn it into farmland. The project was supervised by the head of the provincial revolutionary committee. At daybreak the army marched the villagers to the lake and expected them to dig ditches, pile earth, carry gravel and build paddy fields, doing much of this by hand. An atmosphere of impending war was used to intensify the pressure, as teams competed against each other in trying to reach ever higher targets. Ultimately the reclaimed soil proved too soft and soggy for planting. More earth was added, but the yield remained dismally low. Much of the ecological balance was permanently damaged, with the lake’s transparent blue water turned into a brown scum that killed off many local species. Where the catch of fish had been over 6 million tonnes in 1969, ten years later it had fallen to just over 100,000 tonnes.<sup>26</sup>

Across the country the army intervened, determined to promote the Dazhai model. It whipped up the workforce, using the villagers as footsoldiers to increase output. In a state farm run by the army in Manchuria, everyone awoke at the whistle at 3.30 in the morning. Nobody wanted to lag behind, fearful of being accused of not supporting Chairman Mao. Everyone’s performance was recorded, and those at the bottom of the scale were denounced in public struggle meetings. Nanchu, a young student from Shanghai, carried wicker baskets heaped with manure to the fields, pushing herself to move as fast as possible. Perspiration soaked her clothes, and some salty sweat froze at the corners of her mouth in the deep winter, but she did not slow down. Soon the cold turned her soaked clothes into a frozen armour, rattling with every movement. Surviving the campaign became everyone’s primary concern: ‘With sore backs, aching muscles and weary bones, we persevered stoically for several months.’<sup>27</sup>

Local cadres, too, pushed the workforce to the very limit. They were keen to create a local miracle, determined to turn their village into the next Dazhai and be invited to Beijing to see Chairman Mao. As one villager put it, ‘Learning from Dazhai was the continuation of the Great Leap Forward.’<sup>28</sup>

Like the Great Leap Forward, the campaign to Learn from Dazhai was a gigantic exercise in deception. Dazhai itself was a sham, its model villagers the reluctant actors in a play written by the Chairman. The miracle harvests were fake, obtained by inflating the figures and borrowing grain from other villages. The People’s Liberation Army built much of the irrigation system. Far from being self-reliant, Dazhai received huge subsidies and other forms of aid from the state. What happened in Dazhai was replicated throughout the country, as vast amounts of labour, energy and capital were lavished on showcase projects, from the steel mills at Panzhihua to the reclaimed wetlands of Dianchi Lake. As one eminent scholar of the campaign put it, ‘Rarely has there been a historical moment in which political repression, misguided ideals, and an absolutist vision of priorities and correct methods coincided to achieve such concentrated attacks on nature, environmental destruction, and human suffering.’<sup>29</sup>



## More Purges

Between the summer of 1968 and the autumn of 1969, the newly established revolutionary committees had set out to cleanse the ranks of the party, using their power to get rid of their own opponents. The official line was that enemy agents, traitors and renegades had wormed their way into the very institutions established by the party, concealing their past misdeeds by professing to follow the proletarian revolutionary line. The campaign was about past betrayals by party members, and did not generally affect those who were too young to have experienced the corrupting influence of capitalism before liberation. Students were sent instead to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants.

But plenty of questions still arose about the political reliability of people who had been born after liberation, given the complexity of factional strife and the bewildering diversity of mass organisations that had sprung up at the height of the Cultural Revolution. As the campaign to cleanse the ranks started winding down by the end of 1969, a new movement was launched to ferret out a younger generation of hidden enemies. Beijing alleged that there existed a counter-revolutionary organisation going under the name of 'May Sixteenth', reminiscent of the date in 1966 when the Chairman had circulated a notice to announce that Peng Zhen had turned the capital into a citadel of revisionism.

The 16 May Circular was the inner-party document that had launched the Cultural Revolution, but it remained restricted until it was published a year later on 17 May 1967. In the original notice, the Chairman pointed out that other revisionists, besides Peng Zhen, 'are still trusted by us and are being trained as our successors'. Some Red Guards interpreted this as an indication that Zhou Enlai was about to fall from power. Posters went up branding the premier a 'counter-revolutionary double-dealer' and a representative of the 'bourgeois reactionary line'. Jiang Qing took the lead in trying to expose the premier.<sup>1</sup>

The Chairman intervened, protecting his faithful servant. A few months later, in early August, attacks on the premier were again repudiated, and a witch-hunt started for May Sixteenth elements, denounced as members of a counter-revolutionary organisation. The hunt escalated after the burning of the British mission on 22 August, as detailed charts were produced to claim that a well-organised conspiracy existed at all levels, with underground members in virtually every sector of the state and the army. Zhou Enlai used the purge to retaliate against some of his own enemies inside the Cultural Revolution Group, bringing down several prominent supporters of Jiang Qing, including Wang Li, the man who had encouraged young radicals to seize power in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Zhou Enlai cleverly turned Yao Dengshan, a firebrand inside the ministry, into a scapegoat for the burning of the mission, accusing him of being a 'core member' of the May Sixteenth group. Dozens of others fell from power.<sup>2</sup>

But the height of the campaign did not come until two and a half years later. On 24 January 1970, Zhou Enlai appeared in the Great Hall of the People to address the danger posed by the underground organisation. May Sixteenth, he explained, was merely the name of an extraordinarily complex clandestine organisation, which was 'a hodgepodge of foreign imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries, hidden counter-revolutionaries, nationalist spies, renegades inside the party ranks, traitors, capitalist roaders, revisionist elements, as well as landlords, rich peasants, rightists and bad people who have not reformed themselves'. Two months later, on 27 March, a circular extended the search to anyone who had contravened the party line by committing a 'leftist' or a 'rightist' error. Inside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the institution with the closest ties to Zhou Enlai, more than a thousand followers of the May Sixteenth conspiracy were discovered in the spring of 1970, accounting for roughly half of all staff.<sup>3</sup>

Members of the counter-revolutionary organisation seemed to be everywhere. Millions were implicated, as revolutionary committees used the conspiracy as an excuse to get rid of anybody who had spoken out during the Cultural Revolution. In Nanjing, where the 'monk general' Xu Shiyu held sway, the campaign targeted some 27,000 victims out of a million residents. Xu disliked the rebels intensely, persecuting them vehemently as counter-revolutionaries. He questioned important suspects himself, slapping one major general in the face in order to extract a full confession. More than a third of all faculty members at Nanjing University were persecuted. Hundreds were imprisoned, and twenty-one hounded to their deaths. In the Nanjing Forestry School, nine out of ten teachers were victimised. People who had heeded the call to join the Cultural Revolution were at risk, including students who had travelled to Beijing, Red Guards who had denounced party officials, rebels who had participated in power seizures and, most of all, any person who had ever opposed Xu Shiyu.<sup>4</sup>

Song Erli was one student who had made the mistake of writing a big-character poster against Xu Shiyu at the height of the Cultural Revolution. His university was controlled by the military, and the army ran the state farm he was sent to after graduation. He was compelled to write one self-criticism after another, but in early 1970 he was transferred back to a 'study class' – also administered by the military – that was set up to uncover May Sixteenth elements. The study class turned out to be a prison, and an army officer gave him a long list of names of students and teachers suspected of being conspirators. 'At first I thought that this campaign was very strange. I had never heard of this May Sixteenth group. I said I had heard nothing about it. But what was even stranger was that I saw my comrades one after another confess. Every confession had to be made at a mass meeting in front of the whole study class.' In the end the list of suspects encompassed every member who had ever spoken out against the army. In a strange twist of fate, even rebels who had joined a faction in favour of Xu Shiyu ended up being accused of treachery. 'Because they were rebels. The army doesn't like rebels.'<sup>5</sup>

The campaign was not confined to Nanjing. Across Jiangsu province people were persecuted as counter-revolutionaries. By one account, the number of victims was twenty times higher than those labelled 'anti-rightists' in 1957 in the wake of the Hundred Flowers. A popular ditty did the rounds: 'May Sixteenth are Everywhere, Among Family and Friends'. In Wuxi, the confessions of thirty suspects were broadened to implicate no fewer than 11,000 victims. Here, as elsewhere, the accused were forced to supply the names of other members. Under torture they provided lists of imaginary suspects, and the numbers mushroomed. In some government units every member of staff was arrested.

Across the entire province, the campaign affected more than a quarter of a million people. Over 6,000 suspects were injured or beaten to death during interrogation sessions. Some of those accused preferred to commit suicide rather than denounce others. One woman jumped from a window, strangling herself with a sheet. In death she was still condemned for betraying the party. Her colleagues were forced to attend a denunciation rally and go on stage, one after the other, confessing that she had introduced them to the underground group.<sup>6</sup>

Jiangsu was ferocious, but other provinces where army commanders still faced opposition also used the campaign to eradicate their enemies, real or imagined. In Guangxi, where Wei Guoqing had unleashed the army against the rebels, scores of people were rounded up. In Shanghai, anyone who had ever opposed Zhang Chunqiao ended up in prison. The movement was the final act in the persecution of people who had risen during the Cultural Revolution. Statistics are difficult to obtain, but as many as 3.5 million people were implicated across the country.<sup>7</sup>

On 12 November 1969, a month after his expulsion from the party, Liu Shaoqi died in solitary detention. He had become too weak to get out of bed, but nobody would help him wash, change his clothes or use the toilet. He was covered in bedsores, haggard, his hair long and unkempt. Although he suffered from muscle atrophy in his legs, the guards insisted on tying him down with gauze strips for fear that he might commit suicide.<sup>8</sup>

After his arrest in 1967, he had been beaten repeatedly in mass denunciation meetings and denied medicine for his diabetes. He also suffered from pneumonia, but was kept alive until the Ninth Party Congress. The Chairman had put Zhou Enlai in charge of Liu's case, and the premier denounced his erstwhile colleague as 'a criminal traitor, enemy agent and scab in the service of the imperialists, modern revisionists and the nationalist reactionaries'. After Liu's body had been cremated, the premier toasted the completion of his task at a small banquet.<sup>9</sup>

But there were still plenty of other revisionists and counter-revolutionaries who could undermine the party. Zhou Enlai wrote to the Chairman to point out that resolute measures should be taken against a minority of counter-revolutionaries who were sabotaging the country's preparations for war. The Chairman agreed. On 31 January 1970, the Central Committee called for a strike against all 'counter-revolutionary activities', which were defined in such a way as to encompass almost anything deemed 'destructive'. A week later, on 5 February, it issued a directive demanding that 'corruption', 'speculation' and 'waste' also be resolutely eliminated. This proclamation was equally vague, providing no legal definition of any of these terms, meaning that almost every economic activity taking place outside the planned economy could be criminalised, from selling an egg on the black market to using excessive edible oil in the canteen. These two campaigns lasted from February to November 1970 and largely overlapped, being referred to as the 'One Strike and Three Antis'. Behind the communist jargon lay a ruthless attempt to attack ordinary people who could not be indicted for belonging to the May Sixteenth conspiracy.

Millions had their lives destroyed. In Hubei alone, 173,000 suspects were investigated for 'counter-revolutionary activities', while a further 207,000 were prosecuted for graft, speculation or waste. Although the campaign was supposed to last only ten months, in 1971 the revolutionary committee again persecuted 107,000 'counter-revolutionaries', as well as 240,000 people accused of an economic crime. By the time Lin Biao died in September 1971, the total amounted to an astounding 736,000 cases. Even if some suspects were eventually cleared, this meant that roughly one in fifty people, in every village across the province, fell victim to the campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Like the May Sixteenth conspiracy, many of the charges were trumped up. A good example is a group of rebels who had launched a journal called the *Yangtze Tribune* in 1967. They were radical communists, and a few modelled themselves on the young Mao Zedong. They yearned for a return to the Great Leap Forward, and at the height of the Cultural Revolution they carried out an experiment in militant communism in the countryside just outside Wuhan. They abolished all production teams, making sure that authorities higher up in the people's commune controlled everything related to production. All privately owned livestock had to be surrendered. Collective canteens, abandoned after Mao's Great Famine, were restored. Private buildings were torn down, and the villagers herded into collective dormitories. The experiment met with strong resistance, and the local military soon brought it to an end.

The fate of the rebels associated with the *Yangtze Tribune* was sealed once the Chairman demanded an end to factional violence in July 1968. Within weeks, the provincial revolutionary committee in Wuhan declared their publication to be 'extremely reactionary', and several of its members were arrested. But the scale of persecution escalated one year later in September 1969, after Beijing had characterised the *Yangtze Tribune* as 'a hotchpotch manipulated by a handful of renegades, spies and counter-revolutionaries from behind the scenes'. While no more than a dozen members had ever belonged to the initial group, across the province thousands were now hounded. In 1971, as part of the campaign to strike hard against counter-revolutionaries, no fewer than 15,000 followers of the *Yangtze Tribune* were tracked down, the vast majority having never even heard of the publication.<sup>11</sup>

But most of the victims had very little to do with the factional politics of the Cultural Revolution. In 1971 alone some 89,000 victims of the campaign against counter-revolutionaries in Hubei were people belonging to bad class backgrounds. As elsewhere, they bore the brunt of the campaign. Any expression of discontent with the party, whether real or imagined, was enough to land a social outcast in hot water. Some were accused of having poked a hole in a poster of the Chairman, others of writing reactionary slogans. People who listened to foreign radio broadcasts were arrested. Hundreds of fictive underground organisations were discovered, accused of 'liaising with the enemy'. This included disgruntled citizens who had contacted relatives in Hong Kong and Macau or had written letters to *Pravda*, the mouthpiece of the Kremlin.<sup>12</sup>

Very few culprits were shot. The majority ended up in a 'study class' for re-education, closely supervised by a propaganda team, while hardened cases were sent to the gulag. Even at this stage some people showed a remarkable willingness to confront power. When one man was sent to a class for re-education, he said, 'You can hold your class for three years, I will be stubborn for three years. Hold it for six years and I will be stubborn for six.'<sup>13</sup>

Not everyone was so resilient. Whether the endless harassment, the brutal interrogations or the fantastic nature of the accusations the authorities concocted were responsible, some victims felt they had no future worth living for. In just the first six weeks of the campaign across all Hubei, more than 600 people committed suicide.<sup>14</sup>

Hubei may have seemed exceptional, but the numbers were similar in Gansu. Within the first three months of the campaign, more than 225,000 people were denounced, equivalent to 1.5 per cent of the entire population. By the end of 1970, the total had spiralled to 320,000, equivalent to one in fifty people. Some towns carried out co-ordinated raids, arresting hundreds of people in one fell swoop. This happened in Pingliang, where 393 victims were swept up in a single day.<sup>15</sup>

As in Hubei, the suicide rate was high. Complete statistics are unavailable, given that much of the reporting was haphazard and local authorities were keen to downplay the figures. But by October 1970 more than 2,400 people had ended their lives. In the single county of Jingchuan, forty-five people killed themselves in less than a month.<sup>16</sup>

As elsewhere, endless 'counter-revolutionary' organisations were brought to light. In Chengxian county, sixteen members of a Democratic Party were uncovered, while nine of the chief organisers of a National Salvation Party were arrested in Hezheng. By May 1970, the authorities boasted that more than 2,000 counter-revolutionary cliques, gangs and conspiracies had been broken up. Even the head of the provincial revolutionary committee, at this stage, started advising prudence in prosecuting these organisations, since some were entirely fictitious.<sup>17</sup>

Local authorities were eager to outdo each other, vying to discover ever more cases to demonstrate their dedication to the Cultural Revolution. In Wuwei, a city on the ancient silk road bordering Inner Mongolia, so many doctors were arrested that the main hospital was almost forced to close down. Five medical experts were accused of being 'counter-revolutionaries'. One was found guilty of 'liking freedom'. Another was accused of having listened to a foreign radio station in 1963. A third had been overheard singing a reactionary song in 1966. Even children who had scrawled a slogan on a wall were denounced and paraded through the streets. Such was the pressure to produce results that sometimes a verdict was overturned no fewer than a dozen times in less than three weeks. The liberal use of manacles, shackles and bare fists helped to achieve results and meet quotas.<sup>18</sup>

In the countryside, the Learn from Dazhai campaign promised prosperity and abundance to all those who laboured collectively on the land. The campaign against graft, speculation and waste was the tool revolutionary committees used to enforce this vision. Across the country, the 'Three Antis' was directed at millions of ordinary people who had quietly exploited the chaos of the Cultural Revolution to advance their own economic freedoms. From poor villagers who had enlarged their private plots to ordinary people who had bought some vegetables from the black market, the campaign crushed those accused of following the capitalist road.

In Hubei, they represented 447,000 out of the 736,000 victims who had been harassed by the authorities from February 1970 to October 1971. They made up 169,000 of the total of 225,000 suspects taken to task in the first three months of the campaign in Gansu. In a single town of more than 4,000 people in Wushan county, the authorities suspected roughly one in four of having participated in the black market, some of them selling from stalls, others hawking their goods. It would have been impossible to arrest one-quarter of all the people, but forceful measures against a few prominent targets sufficed to exact compliance from the local population.<sup>19</sup>

These targets, yet again, were people from bad class backgrounds. If not persecuted as 'counter-revolutionaries', they were accused of being the 'black hands' behind the revival of capitalism in the countryside. In Wushan, where scores of people were involved in the black market, the authorities homed in on fifty 'landlords', 'rich peasants' and other class enemies. This was not an isolated example. In all Gansu, the provincial authorities calculated, there were precisely 122,223 people with bad class labels, many of whom were undermining the collective economy. In Lanzhou, the provincial capital, the official press shrilly accused them of subverting the road to socialism. 'In some places, a handful of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists who are not yet remoulded are frantically opposing and undermining the collective economy of the people's communes in an effort to take the capitalist road. Capitalist tendencies and the evil, counter-revolutionary wind of economism in the rural areas are still seriously undermining socialist production.'<sup>20</sup>

From other provinces came similar calls to wipe out all bad elements. In Yunnan, the authorities condemned the monsters and demons who were guilty of corruption, embezzlement, speculation and the neglect of collective farming.<sup>21</sup>

Social outcasts were persecuted for the slightest infringement of the planned economy. But the ranks of the administration were also cleansed of those indicted for following 'capitalist methods'. In Hezheng and Guanghe counties, Gansu, they accounted for one in ten of all government employees. Similar purges took place in other provinces. In Hebei, 45,000 cadres, or one in six of those active in the bureaucracy overseeing trade and commerce, were viewed as suspect and were subjected to a full investigation. Thousands were demoted, dismissed or arrested.<sup>22</sup>

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Nobody knows how many people fell victim to the purges that followed the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969. The hunt for May Sixteenth elements alone may have implicated as many as 3.5 million people. But by far the most ferocious campaign was the 'One Strike and Three Antis', which was so vague as to suit the purposes of any revolutionary committee determined to dispose of its enemies. If the numbers from Hubei and Gansu are representative of the country as a whole, then as many as one in fifty people were denounced at some point or another, equivalent to 16 million people out of a total population of more than 800 million. Not all of those brought to the attention of the authorities ended up being condemned as 'counter-revolutionaries'. In many cases, only a fraction were actually found guilty. And of those, few were shot. In the bloodshed that had followed liberation in 1949, executions had come in the hundreds of thousands. From October 1950 to October 1951, the regime eliminated somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million people. Although the killing quota was fixed at one per thousand, in many parts of the south it was more than double that. But twenty years later, revolutionary committees handed out death sentences more sparingly, with victims counted in the tens of thousands. In Gansu, by April 1970, just over 200 people had been shot, representing less than 1 per cent of all those denounced for one crime or another. Seven times as many suspects killed themselves.<sup>23</sup> The point of these purges was not physically to eliminate the regime's enemies, whether real or imagined, but to intimidate the greatest number of people possible. The objective was to produce a docile population by transforming almost every act and every utterance into a potential crime.

## Fall of an Heir

Liu Shaoqi's body was cremated in great secrecy, in the middle of the night, under a false name. Since he was described as a 'highly contagious patient', only two workers were present to handle the cremation.<sup>1</sup> His death was never publicly announced during Mao Zedong's lifetime, but soon enough the wrangling to decide who should replace him as head of state began.

As heir apparent, Lin Biao would have been justified in thinking that he should occupy the post. But he must have been wary of appearing overly ambitious, and may not even have wanted the position for fear of upsetting the Chairman. In Chinese, the formal title of the leader of the party and of the head of state alike was 'chairman'. Lin Biao knew that there could be only one Chairman.

Mao himself loathed the endless ceremonial duties demanded of a head of state and did not want the job, from which he had resigned in 1959 in Liu Shaoqi's favour. When, ten years earlier in 1949, the chief of protocol had suggested that the Chairman conform to international convention and wear a dark suit and black leather shoes, he had been fired. He subsequently committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. The Chairman enjoyed his freedom, and was not about to be hemmed in by schedule, routine or ritual.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Mao was increasingly suspicious of Lin. After the leadership had vacated the capital in a panic in October 1969, fearing a surprise attack by the Soviet Union, the heir apparent had issued a 'Number One Order' from a bunker in Suzhou, putting the military on red alert. A million soldiers had moved forward to take up strategic positions around the country, backed up by thousands of tanks, planes and ships. The order was soon rescinded, as it became clear that someone along the command structure had jumped the gun and failed to clear it with the Chairman, who was furious at being sidestepped. What precisely went wrong is unclear, but Mao must have realised just how easily his second-in-command could take control of the army and possibly one day turn it against him.

Much as the Chairman needed Lin Biao, he had tried to contain his growing influence over the years by fostering competing factions inside the army. But the heir apparent had triumphed at the Ninth Party Congress. The entire country was becoming militarised in an atmosphere of impending war with the Soviet Union or the United States. The army took over the government and ran the economy. Lin Biao enjoined the whole country to study Mao Zedong Thought, which in effect meant that everyone was learning from the army. Mao himself was constantly surrounded by soldiers, and he suspected that they reported everything to their superiors. His hostility towards the grip the military had on his own life was turning into animosity towards Lin Biao and his generals.<sup>3</sup>

Mao carefully manipulated the issue of the office of head of state against his chosen successor. He was suitably vague in refusing the post for himself, fuelling speculation that he expected his underlings to grovel and insist that he accept. He also dangled the position before the heir apparent, trying to gauge his reaction. Lin insisted that the Chairman should fill the post.<sup>4</sup>

Soon enough two factions emerged. Lin Biao, buttressed by his followers Li Zuopeng and Wu Faxian, the two generals who had helped seize control of Wuhan in the summer of 1967, insisted on a state chairmanship. Always the sycophants, they also demanded that the constitution include a statement that the Chairman was a genius who had creatively and comprehensively developed Marxism-Leninism. Zhang Chunqiao and Kang Sheng, two of the most senior members of the Cultural Revolution Group, were against the office. They also objected to the use of the term 'genius', which was taken from Lin Biao's foreword to the Little Red Book. Both camps believed that they knew best what the Chairman wanted.

The issue came to a head when the Central Committee met in the summer of 1970. Lin Biao asked the Chairman for permission to address objections to the use of the term 'genius' at the start of the conference. Mao saw an opportunity to trap Lin, and encouraged him to do so, throwing in a few deprecatory comments aimed at Zhang Chunqiao and his own wife Jiang Qing. Lin spoke for an hour, eulogising the Chairman.

The following day the conference participants discussed an essay entitled 'On Genius', compiled by Chen Boda. Chen was the nominal head of the Cultural Revolution Group, but he loathed Kang Sheng and felt threatened by his rival's longstanding relationship with Jiang Qing. His star was on the wane, and he had thrown in his lot with Lin Biao soon after he was declared the official successor to Mao Zedong at the Ninth Party Congress.<sup>5</sup>

Chen had been a ghostwriter for the Chairman since the Yan'an days, and many party leaders assumed that the tract reflected the party line. Realising that Zhang Chunqiao was the main target, they attacked him indirectly by demanding that 'plotters' and 'counter-revolutionaries' who still denied the Chairman's genius be expelled from the party. Mao remained aloof, watching from a distance. Soon there were enthusiastic calls for Mao and Lin to become chairman and vice-chairman of the state.

The Chairman now had enough to spring his trap. The heir apparent was spared, but at a special session Mao denounced Chen Boda as a sham Marxist and a long-time enemy spy. He put a halt to all discussion of his genius. He demanded that Lin Biao's generals, who had spearheaded the attack on Zhang Chunqiao, make their own self-criticisms. None was judged satisfactory, and they were left in limbo after more rebukes from the Chairman.

Over the following months Mao placed trusted figures in the top echelons of the army to keep an eye on Lin Biao's generals. He reorganised the Beijing Military Region, suspending two leaders from their posts. Chen Boda was further excoriated as a 'traitor, spy and careerist'. Lin Biao's power was on the decline, Jiang Qing's was on the ascent.

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Chen Boda's fall from grace was only made public months later, but people who knew how to read between the lines had an inkling that something had gone awry. He was number four in the leadership, but his name was missing from the usual lists of important leaders in the newspapers. There were oblique references to a 'sham Marxist', which could only point to someone renowned as an exponent of the communist faith.

But the clearest signal that a dramatic shift in policy was taking place came on 1 October 1970. Each year National Day was celebrated with processions in all major cities, as hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants and students marched in serried ranks, shouting slogans, waving red flags and holding aloft portraits of the Chairman. Mao himself, surrounded by leading party officials, reviewed the annual parade from the rostrum above the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square. There were special stands for foreign dignitaries and diplomats who, like everyone else, noted who stood next to the Chairman. For the first time ever, an American was given that honour. Chen Boda was nowhere to be seen.

Several months after the event, on 25 December, a photograph of Edgar Snow standing by Mao Zedong's side was splashed over the front pages of every major newspaper. In January 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the Chairman had used the veteran journalist to let it be known to the outside world that Chinese troops would not cross the border into Vietnam as long as the United States did not attack China. Now he sent another signal, namely that major changes were afoot in relations with the imperialist camp.



Already after the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969, the Chairman had hedged his bets and asked a team of experts to devise an alternative to Lin Biao's model of a people's war in foreign policy. The task was kept secret and assigned to Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian and Nie Rongzhen, the veteran marshals who had opposed the Cultural Revolution in February 1967. They were given free rein to think outside the box. As war with the Soviet Union loomed after the August 1969 surprise attack in Xinjiang, the marshals came up with a bold plan: play the American card. They favoured exploiting the antagonism between the two superpowers by opening up to the United States. Their assessment was at loggerheads with that of Lin Biao and his generals, who viewed the United States as an enemy on a par with the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

A similar shift in thinking was taking place on the other side of the Pacific. Richard Nixon, the newly elected president, distrusted Moscow far more than Beijing and realised that China had to be brought into the international system. In January 1969 he scribbled a note that read 'Chinese Communists: Short range – no change. Long range – we do not want 800,000,000 living in angry isolation. We want contact.'<sup>7</sup>

Other considerations motivated the Americans. In April 1970, China hosted a 'Conference in Solidarity with the Indochinese People' in Guangzhou chaired by Prince Sihanouk, overthrown a month earlier by a Cambodian general close to the United States. The conference brokered an alliance between communist forces in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, creating a new Indochinese revolutionary front. Five days later, President Nixon extended the war beyond Vietnam's borders, entering Cambodia with a military operation dubbed 'Total Victory'. But instead of wiping out communists ensconced across the border once and for all, the invasion turned the Vietnam War into a Second Indochina War. Soon the Americans were looking to China for assistance in extricating themselves from the quagmire. They, too, hoped to exploit the clash between the two communist giants to isolate North Vietnam's main backer, namely the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup>

Both sides, in any event, had for some time sought to resume talks at the ambassadorial level. These attempts collapsed after Operation Total Victory began, but towards the end of 1970 tensions eased. One week before the photograph of Mao and Snow was released on 25 December, the Chairman told the journalist that he would be happy to meet Nixon, 'either as a president or as a tourist'.

Secret negotiations took place to agree on an agenda, complicated by the Taiwan issue, as Chiang Kai-shek was an ally of the United States. But concessions were made. In early April 1971, the Chinese table-tennis team was sent to Japan to take part in an international tournament. Three of the country's best players had committed suicide during the campaign to cleanse the class ranks in 1968, but now the team was instructed by Zhou Enlai to put 'friendship first, competition second'. In Nagoya, they extended an invitation to the US team to visit China. A few days later, nine American players and several officials crossed the bridge from Hong Kong to the mainland, spending a week playing friendly matches, and visiting the Great Wall and the Summer Palace.<sup>9</sup>

The Forbidden City, just opposite the Great Hall of the People, was still off limits to the ping-pong players, but a week later several foreign parties were permitted to visit – the first such occasion since 1967. Likewise for the first time since 1967, a group of seventy diplomats were taken on an official tour of the country in a special train, visiting large iron and steel works, hydroelectric power stations, tractor factories and model production brigades.<sup>10</sup>

There were other signs of a relaxation towards foreigners. The disdain and abruptness that they usually encountered when dealing with party officials were apparently gone. Some cadres were even affable. Across the border from Hong Kong, where only years previously shots had been fired, they were unusually cordial. At the trade fair in Guangzhou, one of the main points of commercial contact between state officials and the outside world, lectures on Mao Zedong Thought were suspended. Portraits of the Chairman were removed from hotel rooms and anti-American slogans toned down. The city was tidied up.<sup>11</sup>

Local residents, of course, were banned from the trade fair, as a huge discrepancy existed between the variety of food and clothing on display for the export market and the paucity of goods available in the shops. Still, ordinary people could feel the wind of change. A flicker of hope was kindled the moment Edgar Snow appeared next to the Chairman. Nien Cheng, still lingering in the Number One Detention House, became quietly excited and hopeful, if a little apprehensive: 'That communist China might move closer to the West seemed too good to be true.' Outside the prison walls, on the streets of Guangzhou, Shanghai and Tianjin, fewer people pinned badges on their clothes. On some trains crisscrossing the country, portraits of the Chairman were quietly removed.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the visit by the ping-pong team, Henry Kissinger was invited to Beijing. Dazzled by the prospect of dealing with the Middle Kingdom, Nixon's national security adviser came laden with gifts. His country was bound by treaty to Taiwan, but Washington was ready to drop its ally, promising full diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China. Kissinger indicated that the United States would help China obtain the Chinese seat at the United Nations. He lavished praise on the Chinese leaders, and even offered to provide highly classified information, including details of the United States' bilateral negotiations with the Soviet Union. 'We tell you about our conversations with the Soviets; we do not tell the Soviets about our conversations with you.' Kissinger was so awed that he somehow failed to ask for substantial reciprocal concessions.<sup>13</sup>

The trip was kept secret, but on 15 July 1971 Nixon appeared on national television to reveal the preparatory work done by his national security adviser and announce his own impending trip to China. The news sent shockwaves around the world, as the balance of the Cold War shifted away from the Soviet Union. In Beijing, Mao gloated that the United States was 'changing from monkey to man, not quite a man yet, the tail is still there'.<sup>14</sup> He had reduced the leader of the most powerful nation on earth to a mere emissary seeking an imperial audience.

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As the United States and China held secret talks, the split between the Chairman and his heir apparent continued to widen. After Mao had shown his hand in the summer of 1970, undermining his successor by denouncing his theory of genius, he fell ill with pneumonia. Doctors prescribed antibiotics, but Mao suspected that Lin Biao was trying to poison him. 'Lin Biao wants my lungs to rot,' he complained. The situation dragged on, but the relationship had broken down. It was a political impasse.

There were other issues besides personal distrust. Lin Biao had always led a reclusive, secretive existence, shunning the limelight. He often called in sick, suffering from a series of real and imagined diseases. Mao once sneeringly referred to the marshal as the 'forever healthy'. From the summer of 1970, Lin became increasingly inactive, relying instead on his wife to read party documents and do his work. He skipped important meetings. Mao became disillusioned. Lin Biao made a rather unimpressive heir apparent.<sup>15</sup>

By August 1971, the Chairman's distrust reached the point where he started musing aloud about which of the regional commanders would be loyal to Lin Biao in the event of a rebellion. Most of the heir's supporters were in Beijing. Mao embarked on a tour of the south, whipping up support from military leaders in Wuhan, Changsha, Hangzhou and Shanghai. He never mentioned Lin by name, but spread the message that someone had been in a hurry to take over as head of state a year before, and was now trying to split the party and seize power for himself. 'There is someone who says genius appears in the world only once in several hundred years, and in China such genius has not come along in several thousand,' he quipped. 'There is somebody who says he wants to support me, elevate me, but what he really has in mind is supporting himself, elevating himself.'



A month later, at dusk on 12 September, the Chairman's train pulled back into Beijing. Hours later, at about 2.30 the following morning, a British-built Trident crashed in Mongolia. Debris was strewn over a wide stretch of steppe, but the local police soon lined up the charred bodies of eight men and one woman. 'Fire had left most of them naked save for pistol holsters and belts,' recalled Tuvany Jurmed, one of the first police officers to arrive at the crash site.<sup>16</sup>

What exactly happened remains shrouded in mystery, although rumours soon began circulating that Lin Biao had tried to flee to the Soviet Union after the failure of a plot to assassinate the Chairman.

The hand behind the alleged plot to dispose of the Chairman was the heir apparent's twenty-five-year-old son, an officer who despite his relative youth wielded considerable influence in the army, thanks to the protection of Wu Faxian, commander-in-chief of the air force. Lin Liguo knew that his father's position was under threat and understood court politics sufficiently well to realise that the Chairman took no half-measures when it came to his enemies:

Is there a single political force which has been able to work with him from beginning to end? His former secretaries have either committed suicide or been arrested. His few close comrades-in-arms or trusted aides have also been sent to prison by him . . . He is paranoid and a sadist. His philosophy of liquidating people is either to not do it or to do it thoroughly. Every time he liquidates someone, he does not desist until he puts them to death. Once he hurts you, he will hurt you all the way; and he puts the blame for everything bad on others.<sup>17</sup>

Lin Liguo and several close colleagues had devised a half-baked plan to eliminate the Chairman, including attacking his special train with flamethrowers, bombing the train from the air or dynamiting a strategic bridge. Lin Liguo informed his sister Doudou of the plot, but she was opposed to it, believing that any attempt to challenge the Chairman would have dire repercussions for her father. On 8 September she leaked information to two guards responsible for Lin Biao's security.<sup>18</sup>

No assassination attempt was ever carried out. It is unclear whether or not the Chairman got wind of the plot, but at about midnight on 8 September he cut short his tour of the south and suddenly ordered his train to return to Beijing. After a brief stop in Nanjing to meet his loyal follower Xu Shiyu, Mao arrived back in the capital four days later. Immediately after his train had entered the station in the outskirts of the capital, he met with several leaders of the Beijing Military Region, including the two men whom less than a year before he had inserted into the top echelons of the army to watch the generals faithful to Lin Biao. Security was beefed up around Beijing, and the Chairman hunkered down in the Great Hall of the People.

That very same day, fearing that Mao would move against his father, Lin Liguo flew back to Beidaihe, where his family was ensconced in a villa overlooking the Bohai Sea. He wanted his parents to flee. 'To where?' asked his sister Doudou. 'Dalian, or Guangzhou, or Hong Kong. Anywhere, depending on the situation.' But their father refused to budge. Pale, thin and unshaved, his eyes sunken, for months he had known what was in store, and seemed prepared to accept his fate passively.<sup>19</sup>

Doudou realised that the escape plan was hopeless, and tried to protect her father by alerting the central security forces. She was devoted to Lin Biao, but had a strained relationship with Ye Qun. Zhou Enlai was informed by telephone that evening, but no attempt was made to prevent the family from boarding the plane. Lin Liguo and his mother helped the heir apparent to dress, and around 11.30 in the evening they dragged him into a car, rushing off towards the local airport, some forty minutes away. Soldiers holding guns let them pass. Troops had also been dispatched to the airport, but they did not intercept the group either. Panic broke out as the car reached the Trident. As the family and their entourage clambered on board, Lin Biao's wife insisted that they take off immediately, even though the plane had not been fully refuelled. There was no navigator, radio operator or co-pilot on board.

Shortly after the plane disappeared into the sky, the region was plunged into darkness. In Beijing, Zhou Enlai had grounded all planes nationwide and ordered the runway lights to be turned off. The plane flew north, but being short of fuel it did not travel very far, crashing in Mongolia.<sup>20</sup>

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The moment the plane disintegrated, Lin Biao's 'four guardian warriors' began to destroy all evidence of their connections with his family, burning photographs, letters, notebooks and telephone logs. Huang Yongsheng, Wu Faxian, Qiu Huizuo and Li Zuopeng were removed from their posts on 24 September. Zhou Enlai set up a special investigative group to look into the Lin Biao affair. A purge of his followers in the army lasted until May 1973 and claimed hundreds of victims, including prominent political commissars and military leaders in almost every province.<sup>21</sup>

The veteran marshals who had taken Lin Biao and the Cultural Revolution to task in February 1967 felt buoyant. They wasted no time in denouncing their former comrade-in-arms. Chen Yi, always outspoken, lambasted his 'sinister conduct, double-dealing, cultivation of sworn followers and persistent scheming'.<sup>22</sup>

Rumours of Lin Biao's demise began circulating after the parade on 1 October 1971 had been cancelled. Nien Cheng, from her prison in Shanghai, was astonished to find that the morning broadcast on National Day failed to mention the customary celebrations. That very same day, a guard made the rounds of all the inmates to collect their Little Red Books. She returned Nien's copy that evening, but with Lin Biao's foreword torn out.<sup>23</sup>

Soon everybody knew of the alleged plot. Those who listened to foreign radio picked up the news from abroad. Dan Ling, who as a sixteen-year-old had carried a banner flag to welcome the People's Liberation Army in Beijing in 1949, had been condemned as a counter-revolutionary during the Cultural Revolution and banished to the countryside in Manchuria. A village accountant invited him to his house, tuning his radio in to several stations. A Japanese news broadcast covering the death of Lin Biao came through loud and clear.<sup>24</sup>

Whether they overheard foreign radio or were told in party meetings, everyone was shocked. The Chairman was supposed to be infallible, and for years Lin Biao had been presented as his closest comrade-in-arms and designated successor. For Dan, who had so enthusiastically joined the party in his youth, the Japanese news report was the 'best political education' he ever received. It destroyed whatever faith he still possessed in the system. Nanchu, the young woman sent to a state farm in Manchuria, wondered why she should believe in the Chairman if his best pupil did not. 'The pillar of spiritual certainty had completely crumbled inside me. The belief in communism and my unwavering faith in Mao had collapsed.'<sup>25</sup>

Many felt relief. Lin Biao had not been a popular figure. But, most of all, people realised that his death marked the beginning of the end of the Cultural Revolution. One translator who attended a meeting at which an official announcement was made thought 'the sigh of relief was almost audible'. Nonetheless, people reacted very differently. Some felt revulsion, others betrayal. One young woman banished to the countryside remembers that, when she heard the news, she thought her universe had shattered: 'I was shaking. I did not know what was going to happen next.' But her closest friend, also a student in exile, saw hope and instead rejoiced.<sup>26</sup>

The Chairman, too, was shaken. His health took a dramatic turn for the worse. Gone was the beaming and spirited leader who relished political struggle. Mao was depressed and took to his bed, lying there for weeks on end. He suffered from a chronic cold, swollen legs and an irregular heartbeat. He walked with a shuffle, revealed by cameras when he met the North Vietnamese premier a little more than two months after the incident.

But Zhou Enlai was pleased. 'It's best that it ended this way,' he told Mao's doctor. 'A major problem has been settled.'<sup>27</sup>  
The bodies of Lin Biao and Ye Qun were never returned to China. They were buried in Mongolia, but then exhumed with those of the other crash

victims by a team of forensic specialists from Moscow. Like all top Chinese leaders, Lin Biao had spent considerable time receiving medical treatment in the Soviet Union. The Russians wanted to make sure they had their man. The heads of two of the bodies that had gold teeth were severed and boiled in a cauldron to remove the flesh and hair. The bone structure of one of them matched the marshal's medical record perfectly. The two skulls were taken to Moscow and stored in the KGB archives.<sup>28</sup>

## PART FOUR

### THE GREY YEARS (1971–1976)

## Recovery

After spending nearly two months in bed in a state of depression, mulling over his options, the Chairman was finally ready for his next move. He wanted a reconciliation with the veteran marshals pushed aside during the Cultural Revolution. They were still in disgrace. Chen Yi, who had insinuated in February 1967 that Lin Biao was no better than Khrushchev, died of colon cancer on 6 January 1972. The Chairman woke in the middle of the afternoon on the day of his funeral and suddenly decided to attend the ceremony, slipping on a silk robe and a pair of leather sandals. At the funeral parlour he consoled Chen Yi's widow. He blinked his eyes and made an effort to wail. Soon everybody in the room was crying.

After the funeral, other military leaders were restored to their former positions. Chen Zaidao, the general from Wuhan denounced by Lin Biao as a 'counter-revolutionary mutineer', was allowed to preside over official occasions. Yang Chengwu, who had been acting chief of staff before his purge in March 1968, was reinstated. 'Yang Chengwu, I understand you,' Mao wrote, describing him as a victim of Lin Biao. Luo Ruiqing, the chief of staff who had jumped feet first from a window after a gruelling interrogation session in 1965, also had his name cleared. 'Lin Biao falsely accused Luo Ruiqing,' the Chairman said. 'I listened to Lin and dismissed Luo. I was imprudent to listen so often to his one-sided views. I have to criticise myself.' Mao pretended to have been duped all along by a perfidious schemer now gone.<sup>1</sup>

Besides a reshuffling of the top brass, there were other promising indications of a new dawn. Signs of relaxation had followed ping-pong diplomacy in the spring of 1971, and in the first weeks of 1972 entire cities were being spruced up. The reason was simple: Nixon was coming to China.

Whole districts in the capital were scrubbed down in preparation for his visit. Posters were removed, anti-American slogans toned down. Some of the street signs dating from the Cultural Revolution were painted over, as Red Guard Street reverted to its old name of Horse and Mule Street. Doorways and windows along the main roads to Zhongnanhai, Diaoyutai and Tiananmen Square glistened with fresh paint. Rows of trees, some more than three metres tall, were planted by crane at the entrance of the park by the Temple of Heaven. Soldiers still guarded all the main compounds, but their bayonets were gone.<sup>2</sup>

Shanghai, too, received a facelift. According to one observer, more paint was used in a few weeks than the city had seen in twenty-two years. Yuyuan Garden, a sprawling park with pavilions, halls and cloisters built by a wealthy government official in the sixteenth century, had hundreds of doors that were stripped and given a new coat of paint. Many shops changed their names back to pre-Cultural Revolution days. Colours besides red were introduced, with signboards allowed in sky blue, cream and apple green. Variations in calligraphy, so far dominated by Mao's flamboyant handwriting, were encouraged.

Slogans and posters dating from the Cultural Revolution were taken down in a carefully co-ordinated campaign, street by street, district after district. It took a small army of women to scrub out a massive slogan with three-metre-high characters opposite the Peace Hotel proclaiming 'Long Live the Invincible Thoughts of Chairman Mao'. New slogans appeared, welcoming the 'Great Unity of the Peoples of the World'. All references to the Chairman were removed from window displays.<sup>3</sup>

Statues posed a problem. They were numerous and potentially dangerous, as bits of plaster regularly fell on to pedestrians. In one district alone, some 2,000 of them presented a threat to the public. In front of the Shanghai Exhibition Centre, the Chairman's giant arm, boldly extended into an open-hand salute, had come crashing down. Thousands of statues were removed, discreetly sent off to gypsum factories for recycling.<sup>4</sup>

Popular demand for small-sized statues of the Chairman also collapsed. Soon enough, the basements of department stores were packed with tens of thousands of plaster and enamel busts, staring into the void.<sup>5</sup>

Parks were spruced up. In Shanghai more than 300 hectares of green space had been converted for industrial use since 1966, but now the *Liberation Daily* proclaimed that parks were the new face of socialism. Work was carried out on hundreds of parks and gardens badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution. In Fuxing Park, opened in 1909 with flowerbeds, fountains and pavilions, every lamp that had been smashed by the Red Guards was repaired. Zhongshan Park, where the original gate had been dismantled as a sign of imperialism, was restored to at least part of its former glory. The main road to the site of the First National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in the former French Concession, was tidied up, as stunted and diseased wingnut trees were pruned or replaced.<sup>6</sup>

The Chairman, too, was primed and preened. His health had further declined following his impromptu visit to Chen Yi's funeral, and after a brief collapse he was put on a regimen of antibiotics, digitalis and diuretics. His condition improved rapidly. He started practising sitting down and getting up, and received his first haircut in more than five months. Emergency medical equipment was hidden behind potted plants, ready to be assembled within seconds should anything go wrong.<sup>7</sup>

The meeting with Nixon on 21 February 1972 was a success. It was scheduled to last for fifteen minutes, but went on for more than an hour. A week later, a communiqué was issued from Shanghai in which both nations pledged to work towards full diplomatic recognition.

Coming in the wake of the Lin Biao incident, Nixon's visit had huge propaganda value. It was widely interpreted as an admission of defeat by the United States in its attempt to isolate China. Kim Il-sung, leader of North Korea, was reportedly jubilant, saying that 'Nixon went to Beijing waving the white flag!' As propaganda explained, people used to fear imperialism, but now they could see the United States as it really was, namely a paper tiger.<sup>8</sup>

The prestige of the Soviet Union also suffered a blow, as Nixon's visit set off a chain reaction. Leaders of countries from Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia flocked to Beijing, seeking recognition. The visit of the Japanese prime minister Kakuei Tanaka was another triumph for Mao. Although Japan was the most important ally of the United States in Asia, Tokyo was told of the Shanghai communiqué only fifteen minutes before it was broadcast. It was a breach of trust whose effects would be felt for many years.

The United States did less well from the talks.<sup>9</sup> Diplomatic recognition, despite the promises made in Shanghai, was not achieved until six years later. Nixon had also hoped that the rapprochement would achieve some sort of compromise over Vietnam. But China was even more determined to help its allies in Indochina. Its support for the murderous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia never wavered. In the following years America's predicament in Indochina worsened.

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The Lin Biao incident drastically undermined the role of the military, despite the rehabilitation of the veteran marshals. Years before, in the early months of 1967, more than 2.8 million soldiers had been asked to support the revolution, closely shadowing the party and the state. But in August 1972 the

People's Liberation Army went back to its barracks.

The Chairman had little choice but to turn to the party officials denounced as 'capitalist roaders' during the Cultural Revolution. They replaced the army officers, who quietly withdrew from the civilian administration. Ulanfu, the revisionist leader of Inner Mongolia, was returned to power, even though his province was much reduced in size. Li Jingquan, who had lost out against the two Tings in Sichuan, was rehabilitated. Twenty-six other provincial leaders took up where they had left off. As the *People's Daily* put it, 'We should remain convinced that more than 95 per cent of our cadres are good and fairly good, and that a majority of those who have committed errors are able to change.'<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1972, most of the government administrators and party cadres still in May Seventh Cadre Schools were back at their desks.

But the power and prestige they had once wielded were gone. Many of them had been badly damaged by the political infighting of the Cultural Revolution, not to mention the endless purges that had followed the establishment of revolutionary committees under the watchful eye of the military. The old guard lived in fear of committing yet another political mistake, having experienced enough violent shifts in court politics to realise that the climate could change abruptly at any time. Many were keen to demonstrate that they had been fully re-educated and 'were able to change'. They were not about to propose ideas that strayed from rigid communist orthodoxy.

The limits of the recovery were particularly evident when it came to the economy. It remained moribund. The priority given to the Third Front was reduced, since the immediate threat of war no longer existed after the rapprochement with the United States, but massive resources were still being diverted towards heavy industry. Steel targets were cranked up, leading to constant power shortages and strict rationing of energy. In Hubei, in February 1973, top party leaders and foreign experts were the only ones to receive a regular supply of electricity. Half of all street lights in Wuhan were regularly switched off.<sup>11</sup>

Many state enterprises continued to suffer from low productivity. The soldiers in the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams were gone, but the Cultural Revolution had undermined the standing and credibility of the old cadres who replaced them. At best they managed to keep the paper flow moving, at worst they remained paralysed by fear of the next political campaign. Apathy set in among the workers, who over the years had refined a whole range of techniques to resist pressure from above. They knew how to steal time, slacking and shirking on the job. Discipline was lax. Some people used the factory facilities to wash their clothes, others played poker as soon as the manager on duty turned away. Some pilfered factory goods, distributing them to family and friends or bartering them on the black market.<sup>12</sup>

The quality of the output produced by a disenchanted workforce was dismal. In some factories in Guangdong a mere third of all products, from fans and cameras to tractors, conformed to production standards. In other factories in Shaanxi, the proportion of faulty goods reached 50 per cent. The quality of china was so bad that shop assistants in department stores would routinely tap each porcelain bowl with a spoon to check for flaws.<sup>13</sup>

State property was also damaged through sheer carelessness or wilful neglect. In Hankou, one of the largest transportation hubs in central China, freight workers often threw cardboard packages from a height of three metres, shattering the contents. 'The management does not care and neither do we,' they responded when a newly hired worker queried the practice.<sup>14</sup>

The exact dimensions of the problem are hard to identify, if only because transparency and accounting were not among the prime virtues of the planned economy. In Gansu province one in six state enterprises operated at a deficit in 1972. The total losses incurred by the industrial sector had increased by more than a third in the year following Lin Biao's death as a direct result of lower productivity and what was referred to as a 'chaotic administration'. The situation did not improve. Three years later, in 1975, one in four ran at a loss.<sup>15</sup>

In Shaanxi province, one out of every three factories was in the red. Few cadres running the state enterprises seemed concerned about the cost of their products, their only concern being the fulfilment of state-imposed output targets. For each 100 yuan in fixed assets, just over 160 yuan worth of goods were churned out in 1966. By 1974, this amount had plummeted to a mere 84 yuan. The waste was enormous. The Xi'an Cable Company alone had 1,700 tonnes of reject products, valued at 4 million yuan, piled high in the backyard.<sup>16</sup>

As the state continued to view heavy industry as a priority, consumer goods were neglected. The inability of the planned economy to fulfil even the most basic demands of the population had reached surreal proportions during the years of military dictatorship under Lin Biao, when the inherent inefficiencies in capital allocation had been compounded by rigid insistence on self-reliance. The Learn from Dazhai campaign forced entire provinces to cut off many of their old trade connections and sink into economic autarky. Even the production of something as simple as a button became problematic. Before the Cultural Revolution, clothes made in Xinjiang were sent to Zhejiang, where whole villages specialised in the button industry. These national networks were closed down, as textile factories were forced to produce everything locally. The result was shortages for everybody.<sup>17</sup>

Xinjiang did not only suffer from a shortage of buttons. Ordinary people in this sparsely populated province marked by dry steppes, towering mountain ranges and a shifting sand desert had always depended on trade for many of their household needs. But by 1970 even lorry drivers who had to cross the Gobi desert had to wait for several years before they could buy a thermos flask. At wedding ceremonies simple drinking glasses were in short supply. In Turfan, the centre of a fertile oasis where Red Guards had converted minarets and mosques into factories, a single bar of soap had to be shared by three people each season. In the provincial capital of Urumqi, once a major hub on the silk road, washing powder was restricted to one bag per person every four months. Matches and lighters were luxuries. A ration card was required to buy a flint, necessary for lighting fires.<sup>18</sup>

Xinjiang was at the edge of the empire, but even trading cities along the Pearl Delta near Hong Kong were reeling. Foshan suffered from shortages of matches, soap, toothpaste, batteries and cotton cloth. Further north, in the countryside outside Nanjing, toothbrushes were considered such a luxury that most people started using them only after the death of the Chairman in 1976.<sup>19</sup>

The regime was aware of these problems, and some adjustments were made. Even though the campaign to Learn from Dazhai would not wind down until several years after the Chairman's death, the dogmatic insistence on economic autarky softened. State enterprises, once again, started sending travelling representatives and purchasing agents to renew commercial links across the country after 1971. A good indication of this activity was the Guangzhou Trade Fair, where attendance shot up. In the spring of 1973, the fair attracted up to 127,000 visitors a day, far more than previous years. Every hotel was fully booked. Beds were added to guest rooms, turning them into dormitories, but were still not enough, as hundreds of delegates had to get through the night sitting in hotel lobbies. In Shanghai, too, a resurgence in trade saw a record number of purchasing agents, as some 65,000 visitors crowded every hotel in the early months of 1973. In the Huashan Hotel alone, 400 guests slept in the corridors. In the Xinhua Hotel visitors had to sit in the reception for three nights before they were entitled to a mat in the corridor. Hundreds of people slept on the floors of barber shops.<sup>20</sup>

Trade with the West was encouraged. There was an enthusiastic procession of American businessmen, keen to make the pilgrimage to Beijing. Photos appeared of a genial David Rockefeller in a flowery sports shirt standing among smiling officials from the Bank of China. New equipment and advanced technology was imported, replacing some of the antiquated machinery in a number of state enterprises.<sup>21</sup>

Restrictions imposed on arts and crafts at the height of the Cultural Revolution were relaxed. The Ministry of Light Industry still banned 'reactionary, pornographic and repulsive products', but artefacts hitherto condemned as 'feudal' or 'superstitious' were once again allowed, bringing in several million US dollars from exports alone each year. Ethnic minorities, too, were allowed to resurrect some of the handicrafts banned since 1966, from



Korean woks to Tibetan bowls. In general, there was more emphasis on light industrial products than before.<sup>22</sup>

The countryside, too, was allowed to diversify its production and establish small industries, a policy heralded by the premier at a North China Agricultural Conference held in August 1970. The idea was that China should ‘walk on two legs’, as rural enterprises would support agricultural development, for instance in producing farming tools, chemical fertilisers and cement. But it was hardly a new departure. In Dazhai, the peasants working under Chen Yonggui operated a brick kiln, a noodle factory and a bauxite mine, as agriculture and industry merged to further the collective cause. The whole idea of ‘walking on two legs’ dated from the Great Leap Forward, when the Chairman thought that his country could overtake its competitors by relocating industry in the countryside, liberating the productive potential of every peasant in giant people’s communes. The rural enterprises that the state encouraged remained firmly under collective leadership.<sup>23</sup>

Despite a softening in official rhetoric and some tinkering with government policy, the planned economy remained incapable of improving the livelihood of most ordinary people. As late as 1974, many cities could barely produce half of all commodities required to satisfy the basic needs of the population.<sup>24</sup>

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Ziyang county is located in the midst of great natural beauty, as the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze, flows majestically between several towering mountain chains. Some of the best tea comes from this part of Shaanxi province, as rich soil, a mild climate and plentiful rain produce jade-green leaves rich in selenium. In December 1973, a party official on an inspection tour came across a small shed by the side of the road, cobbled together with bits of thatch and a few planks. It was shared by a family of seven, who slept on the floor, separated from the frozen earth by a thin layer of slate and shredded cotton. They had no clothes and tried to keep warm by wrapping themselves in straw. The stalks barely held together, as the shrivelled breasts of the mother, aged forty, were left exposed. The family boasted no possessions other than a few broken bowls and one corrugated-tin can. An old man sat in a corner quietly sobbing, repeating the same desperate plea over and over again: ‘Please allow the government to take care of us!’ The inspector wanted to give them his coat, but realised that he still had ten more days on the road, travelling in the middle of the winter with temperatures plunging to minus 10 degrees. ‘I felt terrible because I did not take off a single piece of clothing to help them,’ he later recalled. When he questioned the head of the local district, he was told that a fifth of the villagers lived in similar circumstances. In a single commune, fifty people had starved to death in the spring, and more would follow that winter.<sup>25</sup>

Little changed in the following two years. In December 1975, some 70 per cent of the population in Ziyang lived on less than 500 grams of grain per day. Poverty was particularly pronounced in the mountainous areas of the county, where up to a third of the villagers could not even afford to buy salt or put oil in their lamps. Many did not have a blanket, a bowl or a tool to work the land.<sup>26</sup>

Across the province as a whole, more than 5 million people went hungry. ‘Some villagers only have 125 to 130 kilos of grain for the entire year, and if we take into account the debts they still have to pay, in the months to come they will have less than ten kilos of food per person per month,’ one official noted. Many thousands starved to death. Famine oedema and extreme emaciation were common. People who did not die of hunger tried to flee the countryside, begging for a living on the roads. In the south of the province, where Ziyang was located, people ate mud.<sup>27</sup>

Shaanxi was not the only province where millions went hungry. Starvation remained common in large parts of the countryside until 1976. In Hebei, the province that surrounds Beijing and Tianjin, more than 5 million villagers lacked food in 1975. In Qingxian county alone, the average amount of food eaten per day across whole villages was a mere 400 grams.<sup>28</sup>

Across the border from Hebei, to the south-east, the province of Shandong was ravaged by famine in 1973. As a last resort, half of the population in Dongming county consumed the seeds normally set aside for sowing in the following season. They also ate the fodder destined for plough animals, long since gone, and sold the tiles on their roofs, their bedding and sometimes even their own clothes. Thousands took to the road, forming large gangs of beggars that roamed the countryside. The numbers were stark: in the Jining region, 1.6 million people lacked food, while 2.2 million went hungry in Linqin.<sup>29</sup>

Further inland, in Hubei, famine remained common in the years following the Lin Biao affair. In 1972, a third of the population in various counties had to survive on less than 13 kilos of grain a month. In Yichang, the province’s second largest city with jurisdiction over large parts of the surrounding countryside, one official report noted that ‘as a result of insufficient nutrition, people have started to suffer from oedema, emaciation, a prolapsed uterus, amenorrhoea and other diseases’.<sup>30</sup>

Two years later, in 1974, many of the villagers in Tongshan county had less than 8 kilos of food per month, the rough equivalent of two small sweet potatoes per day. In some villages, an investigator noted, from March to May ‘there is only an average of 1.5 kilos per month’. The famine was not confined to Tongshan. In Jianli, on the northern bank of the Yangtze River, tens of thousands of people were reduced to begging for a living. One such was Pi Hanbin, who had no more than 10 kilos of grain a month, to be shared with his wife and their five children. Not all of them were hardy enough to head for the city in the hope of finding some food. Chen Zhengxian, who hailed from a neighbouring village, could no longer bear to listen to the constant cries of hunger from his child and swallowed rat poison. Similar deprivation could be found across the province.<sup>31</sup>

These are but a few examples from the countryside, and no doubt the archives in other provinces contain equally telling examples, yet even in villages just outside once prosperous cities hunger remained a constant worry. In the suburbs of Shanghai, a full third of all people’s communes had sunk into poverty by 1973. Outside Wenzhou, a thriving foreign treaty port before the Second World War, in 1976 droves of villagers sold all their belongings and fled mass starvation.<sup>32</sup>

Nobody inside the cities starved to death, since much of the grain procured from the countryside was earmarked for urban residents. But even in the capital the diet was barely sufficient. The canteen at Peking University, according to one of the first foreign students allowed to enrol in the wake of the Sino-American rapprochement, looked like a prisoners’ mess straight out of Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, ‘a dark sea of plank benches and rough tables’. Staff and students had to queue up with their own enamel bowl at a tiny window for a ladleful of slop. The food would have looked like a feast to starved villagers, but it was always identical: ‘tasteless cornmeal mush, with a teaspoonful of inedible salted vegetables. Lunch, the only time my classmates ate meat, was a sliver or two of pork fat mixed with stale cabbage. The rice was dry and tasteless, broken grains, more gray than white, polluted with tiny fragments of gravel and coal. I learned to chew carefully to avoid breaking a tooth.’ In the country’s premier university, the students were permanently undernourished.<sup>33</sup>

Much as the old guard were unable to tackle the dismal performance of industry, they were unable to change the fundamentals of agricultural production in the people’s communes.

Not that the leadership was oblivious to the state of permanent crisis in the countryside. In 1970, China imported a record 6.5 million tonnes of chemical fertiliser and purchased 5.36 million tonnes of grain – the highest amount since the start of the Cultural Revolution. In an effort to improve grain output, the regime introduced a wide range of agricultural innovations from August 1970 onwards. In the same way that advanced technology was

bought from abroad to spruce up state enterprises, improved seeds, pesticides, fertilisers and farm machinery were made available in parts of the countryside.<sup>34</sup>

In a shift away from the extreme rhetoric of radical collectivisation, villagers were once again encouraged to cultivate their own private plots in their spare time, provided all collective duties had been completed. Local markets were allowed to operate in the countryside, but within the constraints of the planned economy, meaning that a great variety of products remained off the table, including all foodstuffs over which the state had a monopoly, from cotton, edible oil, meat and grain to tobacco and timber. These measures did not amount to much, and did not go beyond some of the policies introduced in the aftermath of the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward.

Still, even minor tinkering with a bankrupt economy had an impact, especially after years of military dictatorship. Grain production increased. But it did not raise the income of most villagers. Several economists have used official statistics to calculate that the per capita expenditure for the rural population actually declined in the 1970s. The reason was quite simple: the state took away the surplus. In 1971, the country produced a crop of 240 million tonnes, more than ever before, but as the leaders in Beijing noted, this represented, on paper, a paltry 25 kilos of unprocessed grain per person each month – before the state procured 45 million tonnes.<sup>35</sup>

A similar trend could be seen in other aspects of agricultural production. The leadership did not abolish its narrow focus on the production of grain, but did encourage economic diversification. The people's communes were even allowed to grow a limited quantity of cash crops, to be sold on local markets to achieve the goal of economic self-sufficiency. But here too, the changes were limited. The number of pigs increased in the early 1970s, but as pork remained a state monopoly there were too few incentives to lead to a sizeable improvement in protein for everybody. In 1971, for instance, Gansu province had a million more pigs than the previous year, and close to 2 million more when compared to 1966. But on average one animal weighed a third less when compared to five years earlier. As a result, the provincial capital of Lanzhou consumed 155 tonnes of pork per month in 1971, the equivalent of less than half a kilo per person. In 1965 it had been 240 tonnes, even though fewer people lived in Lanzhou. In grain and in meat, as with basic daily commodities, the regime simply could not keep up with an expanding population base.<sup>36</sup>

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When the Chairman died in 1976 at least 20 per cent of the population, equivalent to 200 million people, suffered from chronic malnutrition.<sup>37</sup> A widespread state of semi-starvation was not helped by poor health. In towns and cities across the country, hospitals had been battered by denunciation meetings and factional fighting at the height of the Cultural Revolution. In Wuhan, by the spring of 1967, chaos reigned in most hospitals, as doctors not yet denounced by rebels started fainting with exhaustion, forced to work around the clock for fear of being accused of bourgeois behaviour. A survey of one medical facility showed that nine out of ten staff suffered from liver infections caused by poor hygiene. Wuhan was hardly unique. Reliable statistics are rare, but in the case of Hebei province the number of workers in health care decreased from 88,400 in 1965 to 66,900 five years later. Relative to the overall population, the number was less than it had been in 1952, twenty years earlier.<sup>38</sup>

The decline stabilised somewhat in the years following Lin Biao's death, but many people continued to suffer from a wide variety of chronic diseases, as evidence from the archives shows. In Foshan, some 20 kilometres south of Guangzhou, in 1973 a third of the workforce earned less than 20 yuan a month. Since a family spent an average of 10 to 11 yuan on food alone, even a minor illness could push them into a deficit, adding an extra financial burden of 2 to 3 yuan a month. A more serious condition cost 10 yuan a month. Still, people in Foshan fared better than their counterparts in other cities of Guangdong. In Zhaoqing, a quarter of the workforce was on less than 12 yuan a month in 1974.<sup>39</sup>

In Foshan one in every five workers lived with a chronic disease. It was the same across the province. In some chemical factories more than two-thirds of the workforce were ill. Tuberculosis, liver infections and mental illness were common. Before the Cultural Revolution, a number of medical institutions had specialised in treating these conditions, but they had been absorbed by general hospitals. Thousands of beds had vanished.<sup>40</sup>

Conditions in the countryside were far worse. On 26 June 1965, the Chairman himself had pointed the finger at the Ministry of Health, accusing it of being a Ministry for Urban Lords dedicated only to the needs of the upper crust at the expense of ordinary people, particularly in the countryside. Two years later, as 'Smash Elitist Health Care' became the slogan of the day, Mao offered a magic cure. Education, in his opinion, was overrated, and anybody could become a doctor. Ordinary villagers were put on short courses before being asked to attend to the medical needs of the masses. The Chairman called them 'barefoot doctors'.

In Sichuan, Jung Chang was one of the many students sent to the countryside who was selected to become a doctor. She went to work 'with absolutely no training'. Elsewhere, barely literate farmers were not prepared for even simple courses in medicine, and received training for as little as ten days. One candidate remembers that 'only twenty minutes after the class began some students became sleepy. Their heads dropped bit by bit, like chickens pecking rice. With each passing minute, more and more students were napping. Later, a few even snored loudly in class, with saliva dribbling out of their mouths. They could not be woken up.'<sup>41</sup>

The project was a sham, and one that conveniently moved the burden from the state to the collective. In the spirit of self-reliance, the barefoot doctors received virtually no help from the state, with the exception of preventive vaccines. Many could not even perform simple emergency procedures.<sup>42</sup>

Still, there were large numbers of them, and many were dedicated to their work, if only because the job offered an escape from tilling the fields. Another positive outcome was the reduction in price of the basic medical kit with which barefoot doctors were equipped, for instance stethoscopes, thermometers and blood-pressure monitors. These tools became far more widespread than before.<sup>43</sup>

The price of many medications also dropped. A good example was the reduction in the prevalence of cretinism, a condition of severely stunted physical and mental growth caused by lack of iodine in the diet. Many villagers living in the mountainous areas of Ziyang, for instance, could not afford to buy salt. Thanks to the distribution of cheap tablets containing iodine, in Shaanxi province as a whole the number of cases of cretinism by 1974 was halved from 4 million at the start of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Yet even something as basic as iodised salt remained in short supply, and in Shaanxi, Hubei and other provinces the state failed to reach many millions of people. And while some easily preventable diseases were on the decline, others increased. The number of cases of malaria, for instance, jumped five-fold in Hubei after 1966, and still blighted the lives of 2.6 million villagers in 1974.<sup>45</sup>

The reality was that the co-operative medicine represented by barefoot doctors thrived only briefly, at the height of the government campaign in 1968. Within a few years it collapsed in large parts of the countryside. In Fuyang county, to take but one example, it had been abandoned by two-thirds of all the people's communes by 1971. Villagers, like many workers in the cities, once again had to pay for medical services, and at 2 to 10 yuan the fees were prohibitive.<sup>46</sup>

As a result, poor health was the norm in large swathes of the countryside. Precise studies are lacking, since the authorities faced many other pressing demands, with one political campaign following on the heels of another throughout much of the Cultural Revolution. Most of all, there were no funds to tackle chronic diseases in the countryside, much less to carry out in-depth medical examinations. But when in 1972 work teams were sent into the

villages of dozens of counties in Shandong to check the health of women of reproductive age, they found that between 30 and 38 per cent of the women they examined suffered from a gynaecological disorder. Some had a prolapsed uterus, caused by a combination of work overload and malnutrition. Others suffered from a pelvic inflammatory disease or cervical erosion. Many were so sick that they never got out of bed. In the absence of medical care, infant mortality rates were also high, as villagers fell back on traditional practices, using local midwives who had no medical training. In one village, a traditional midwife delivered thirty babies, of whom ten subsequently died. Puerperal fever as well as maternal deaths were common. In a single commune in Gaotang, thirty-six women died while giving birth in 1971 alone. In most villages, real medical improvements would only come much later, after the people's communes had been abolished in 1982.<sup>47</sup>

## The Silent Revolution

Set amid dusty sandstone-coloured hills in northern Shaanxi, Yan'an is one of the most hallowed places in communist propaganda. At the end of the Long March in 1936 it was taken over by the communists, and became their temporary capital during the Second World War. Decades later, Yan'an had become a symbol of the ideal communist man, one who merged with the collective in war and work alike. The 'Yan'an spirit' heralded selfless dedication to the greater good, as people fused into a collective force powerful enough to move mountains.

While Yan'an loomed large in the communist imagination, the place itself was dirt poor and had been largely bypassed by the revolution. But some local people did not wait for an invitation from above to pull themselves out of poverty. When a propaganda team arrived in Yan'an in December 1974, they found a thriving and sophisticated black market. One village had abandoned any attempt to wrench food from the arid and parched soil, specialising in selling pork instead. In order to fulfil their quota of grain deliveries to the state, they used the profit from their meat business to buy back corn from the market. Local cadres supervised the entire operation. No one in the village seemed to have any interest in politics. More than three years after the demise of Lin Biao, posters of the erstwhile heir apparent still fluttered in the wind. Slogans painted on outside walls were fading, and dated mostly from 1969.<sup>1</sup>

Yan'an was not alone in taking to the market. Entire people's communes in Luonan, less than two hours away from Xi'an by bus, had divided up all collective assets and handed responsibility for production back to individual families. Many villagers abandoned two decades of monoculture, imposed by a state keen on grain to feed the cities and barter on the international market, and cultivated crops that performed well on the black market. Some rented out their plots and went to the city instead, working in underground factories and sending back remittances to the village. Other freedoms flourished. The head of one production team, instead of adorning his front door with slogans exalting the Chairman, displayed couplets composed by a Tang dynasty emperor. Traditional geomancy, decried as superstition since liberation, seemed to matter more than the latest party directives, which everybody ignored. Spirit mediums and fortune tellers did the rounds.<sup>2</sup>

In Pucheng, further to the north of Xi'an, some cadres also stood back and allowed the villagers to go about their business. Here, too, propitious couplets in traditional calligraphy largely displaced loud slogans in brash red, and here too, party officials expressed little interest in reading newspapers, let alone keeping up with the party line. 'Not one party meeting has been called, and not one of the prescribed works of Marx, Lenin and Chairman Mao has been studied,' complained one report. In some production brigades, telephone conferences were not a realistic prospect, since the lines had been cut down and were used by the villagers to dry sweet potatoes. Instead of working for the collectives, people with any kind of expertise offered their services to the highest bidder. There were doctors who gave private consultations for a fee. There were self-employed artisans. Chen Hongru, classified as a 'rich peasant' and a 'counter-revolutionary' to boot, worked as a carpenter on the black market, helping out production teams during the busy season for no less than 25 work points a day, more than twice the amount a hard-working male adult could earn in a collective.<sup>3</sup>

This all took place in Shaanxi, where millions went hungry, some of them eating mud or stripping bark from trees. In Ziyang, where one inspector had come across the starving family of seven surviving in a shed in the midst of winter, the local authorities had shrugged their shoulders. But elsewhere in the province, some cadres preferred to hand out the land to the villagers and let them try to survive by their own means rather than watch them die of hunger or steal the grain directly from the fields.

Necessity is the proverbial mother of invention, and the overlap between sheer destitution and the entrepreneurial spirit could be found elsewhere. The most influential example came from Anhui, one of the first provinces to have sunk into mass starvation in 1959. Anhui had also been one of the first to emerge from Mao's Great Famine by allowing farmers to rent the land in 1961. In the summer of 1962 the Chairman attacked Zeng Xisheng, the provincial leader, as a 'capitalist roader', and the land was recollectivised in the following years.

But as the military dictatorship under Lin Biao collapsed and the soldiers returned to their barracks, villagers in many parts of the countryside tried to regain control over the land and leach power away from the state. In some cases, local cadres took the lead, distributing the land to the farmers. Sometimes a deal was struck between representatives of the state and those who tilled the land, as the fiction of collective ownership was preserved by turning over a percentage of the crop to party officials. Bribery often greased the wheels of free enterprise, as villagers paid cadres to look the other way.

The return to market principles was facilitated by divisions at the top. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, partisan wrangling and factional infighting among the leadership had resulted in constant changes in government policy. On the ground, villagers were often subject to the ebb and flow of radical politics, as the precise contours of the collective economy, from the size of private plots to the number of animals that a family could own, shifted from one campaign to the next. They were also at the mercy of the local cadres, who had some scope to interpret or negotiate the constantly changing rules of the game.

This became particularly prominent after the North China Agricultural Conference in the summer of 1970, as Zhou Enlai tried to move away from the destructive effects of extreme collectivisation. In subsequent months, numerous articles appeared in the press stressing the right of villagers to cultivate their own private plots, the importance of local peasant markets and the contribution of cash crops to the collective economy. These measures did not go beyond what had been introduced after the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward, but they softened some of the more extreme interpretations of the Learn from Dazhai campaign. On 26 December 1971, precisely seven years after Chen Yonggui had shared a meal with the Chairman to launch the slogan 'In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai', the *People's Daily* even cautioned against 'blindly learning from Dazhai'.<sup>4</sup>

A more moderate approach towards agriculture was helped by the purges that followed Lin Biao's death. Half a dozen provincial leaders who had embraced radical collectivisation were replaced. But Chen Yonggui did not simply vanish from the scene after 1971. Throughout the Cultural Revolution the Chairman had pitted one faction against the other. In 1973 Chen Yonggui was elected a member of the powerful Politburo and transferred to Beijing, where two years later he was appointed a vice-premier of the State Council. Throughout he remained influential, and even after the death of the Chairman he continued to denounce private plots as the 'tail of capitalism'. At one point he suggested that the whole of Gansu province should be modelled on Dazhai.

Given these conflicting messages from the top, very different approaches appeared throughout the countryside, as overzealous cadres continued to impose radical collectivisation and ban private plots in some places while elsewhere villagers were allowed more scope for private initiatives. But most of all, as the standing of the party suffered a blow in the aftermath of the Lin Biao affair, some cadres started deliberately twisting and bending various state directives, taking them far beyond what the leadership intended. As one village official put it, the rural cadres, 'after the continuous flip-



flop of government policies and after their repeated humiliations in public during struggle sessions', lost interest in politics. They devoted their energy to production instead. Some of them opened up every portion of collective property to negotiation, from control over the pigsty, the fish pond and the forest to the exact dimensions of individual plots. They allowed a black market to thrive, realising that their own livelihoods, including the food they ate, depended on free trade. They encouraged the villagers to leave the collectives and strike out on their own.<sup>5</sup>

A good example comes from Fenghuang, an ancient town in Hunan where giant wooden wheels scooped up water from the river to irrigate the terraced rice fields. As elsewhere, the villagers seized three opportunities to expand their private plots. They did so first during Mao's Great Famine, trying to escape from starvation as best they could. Then they used the initial chaos of the Cultural Revolution to reclaim more land from the state. They were forced to surrender all gains during the campaign to Learn from Dazhai, but in 1972 they expanded their plots by more than 50 per cent.

Private plots were not to constitute more than 5 per cent of the land, and people were allowed to cultivate them only once their daily duties to the collective had been fulfilled. But in Fenghuang, as in many other places, some villagers, with the consent of the cadres, interpreted the loosening of agricultural policy as a licence to withdraw from the people's communes and work all day on their own. Many went private, growing vegetables or fishing for shrimps. Wu Tingzhong, for instance, declined the basic food ration he was entitled to as a member of his production team, and relied instead on his own plot to grow potatoes, vegetables and tobacco in sufficient quantities to feed himself and sell a surplus worth 400 yuan a year. The entire production team soon followed his lead, as they pooled their resources to focus on producing cash crops. It was a socialist world turned upside down, as those who answered the call of the market thrived while members of the collective remained mired in poverty. Wu Qinghua, a loyal follower who obeyed every order from the people's commune, earned barely enough work points to get by. He lived in a converted latrine, dressed in rags and lived in destitution, as he had to borrow money from the collective to help tide him over a bad season. Fenghuang was divided. The cadres leaned towards Wu Tingzhong.<sup>6</sup>

The restrictions on trade remained in place throughout the nation. Even when local officials and team leaders decided to close their eyes or bend the regulations, people like Wu Tingzhong and others still had to evade tax officials and other government agents. In the wake of the North China Agricultural Conference, local peasant markets were once again encouraged, but a ban on trading in commodities over which the state had a monopoly remained in place, from grain, meat, cotton, silk, tea and tobacco to groundnuts. But here too, the grip of the state weakened significantly after the Lin Biao affair.

One example comes from Tang Huangdao, a villager who fried peanuts and cakes at night and sold them by the roadside to travellers. Like many others, he hid most of his wares in the fields, only carrying a small quantity of merchandise with him. When he was caught, everything was confiscated, but there was no other punishment. Outside Tang's village in Henan, a province that had sustained massive devastation during the Great Leap Forward, a blockade was sometimes imposed to prevent the sale of grain, normally requisitioned by the state in a monopoly imposed decades earlier in 1953. In the months before and after the wheat harvest in early summer, checkpoints were set up along the main roads to stop people from carrying away bags filled with corn or wheat on their bicycles. But the villagers knew how to avoid the militia, carrying small amounts under cover of darkness or making multiple trips with hidden containers to avoid detection. In any event, a weakened state was no longer a match for determined individuals who had honed their skills over many years of hardship. Villagers who had survived the horrors of Mao's Great Famine were not about to be intimidated by a tax officer hanging about at a roadblock in a conspicuous uniform.<sup>7</sup>

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Much as need ruled large parts of the country, prompting villagers to rely on their own wits to pull themselves out of destitution, opportunity also played an important role. Some villages were better off than others. They capitalised on their advantages to improve their collective lot, whether these were proximity to transportation routes, abundant fish and wildlife, a regular water supply, fertile soil, a level terrain for farming or access to sources of energy such as coal and wood.

Wealthy regions joined those mired in poverty in a silent revolution that subverted the planned economy. In villages along the southern coast, people raised ducks, kept bees, bred fish, baked bricks and cut timber, always in the name of the collective. In the county of Xinchang, Zhejiang, with a population of roughly a quarter of a million people, by late 1971 some two-thirds of all villagers were independent – or 'go-it-aloners' in the parlance of the time. Much of this was done with the tacit consent of the local authorities, who rented the land to individual households in exchange for a portion of the crop. A year before the death of the Chairman, the habit of leaving the collectives to try one's luck on private land or in underground factories was described as 'widespread' throughout the province. Wenzhou took the trend to the extreme, as private capitalism flourished in the city and its isolated delta despite repeated harassment from the government.<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere was this trend more evident than in Guangdong, a subtropical province with plenty of light, heat and water as well as abundant waterways and a long coastline ideal for economic growth. Markets were ubiquitous. In Qingyuan, virtually every commodity normally banned from the market by virtue of a government monopoly was openly on sale, including grain, peanuts, oil and tobacco. Business was swift. It took a team of five youths sent by the village elders no more than half an hour to dispose of 200 kilos of grain.<sup>9</sup>

Further inland, in the county of Puning, some thirty markets covered the needs of more than a million people. They attracted local farmers, artisans and traders, each with their vendible goods on hand, back or cart. Pedlars offered colourful illustrations from traditional operas, books from the imperial and republican eras and collections of traditional poetry that had escaped the clutches of the Red Guards. There were itinerant doctors offering their services. Storytellers used wooden clappers to mark the most dramatic moments of their stories. Blind people sang traditional folk songs for alms. Touts stood outside local restaurants selling ration coupons. Many hundreds came by bicycle from other parts of the province each day. In some markets, organised gangs travelled up and down the coast, going all the way to Shanghai to trade in prohibited goods. A few went as far as Jiangxi to procure tractors, acting on demand from local villages keen to mechanise.<sup>10</sup>

Here, too, the local cadres were reluctant to interfere. Some even encouraged the villagers to abandon grain production, mandated by the state, and pursue more profitable crops instead. Government agents failed to stamp out illegal trading, as 'they are only concerned with collecting fees, and do not care about government policy', the authors of one detailed investigation deplored. Small pedlars could be suppressed, the report continued, but 'the cadres and the villagers will have no vegetables to eat'.<sup>11</sup>

The market exploited the difference between the fixed price set by the command economy for agricultural products and the higher amounts ordinary people were prepared to pay. A difference of 100 per cent was common, but some commodities, for instance soybeans, reached 500 per cent, meaning that the state procured at 0.44 yuan per kilo when the same amount could fetch 2.2 yuan on the market.<sup>12</sup>

The market in Puning, like elsewhere, thrived because the command economy could not deliver sufficient goods to meet the demands of ordinary people. Widespread shortages forced prices up, stimulating private enterprise. Timber was a case in point. By 1973, fir was ten times more expensive than it had been at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Across the county were thousands of unfinished houses that had been abandoned for lack of timber. Some people were willing to pay a premium on the black market. Across the mountains in the north of the province there was random



falling of trees. The trade was not limited to a few farmers bringing planks to market on their bicycle carts. There were hundreds of factories in Lechang, Qingyuan and Huaiji trading illegally in timber, up to 70,000 cubic metres in 1973 according to one estimate.<sup>13</sup>

Guangdong had another asset that helped some people sidestep the planned economy. Not far away from the Pearl River Delta, in the midst of a continuous stretch of jade green spread out like a huge carpet, dotted here and there with banana groves, counties like Kaiping and Taishan were traditionally dominated by emigration overseas. Before liberation, whole villages had displayed ostentatious mansions built by returned migrants, including thousands of large, fortified towers influenced by foreign architecture, with features ranging from flushing toilets and marble tiles to Gothic battlements and turrets. Relations between these emigrant communities and the communist party were bad, and in 1952 many bore the brunt of a bloody campaign of land reform. Years later, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when people lived and died by their class background, many were denounced as ‘spies’, ‘traitors’ and ‘counter-revolutionaries’, further disrupting links with overseas communities. But after 1970 goods and remittances once again started to pour across the border. By 1974 the amount of money reaching the villagers from overseas was twice as high as in 1965. Families with overseas connections had been the first to suffer from the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution, and now they were the first to emerge from uniform poverty. They used foreign remittances to tackle a housing crisis created by years of neglect if not wilful assault on anything bearing the hallmark of imperialism. In Taishan and elsewhere in the region, they bought up steel, timber and concrete. Chen Jijin shared a mud hovel with his family of eight. They were waiting for a remittance of 20,000 yuan to build a new house – a sum representing the annual salary of thirty qualified factory workers.<sup>14</sup>

The number of parcels from abroad went up. In Guangzhou, the provincial capital, more than 200,000 packages had accumulated in 1972, but the backlog was cleared by the end of the year. They contained mainly clothes and edible oil, reflecting local market shortages. Other commodities included beans, bulbs, matches and medicine. Some of them found their way on to the black market.<sup>15</sup>

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A measure of decollectivisation could also be seen in other provinces. In Sichuan, the huge inland province that had suffered terribly during Mao’s Great Famine before being wrecked by the two Tings who controlled the provincial revolutionary committee, the land was rented to the farmers in the early 1970s. The desire to own land was driven from below and only ratified by local authorities much later.<sup>16</sup>

But returning the land to the cultivators was but one aspect of a silent revolution in the countryside. Some wealthier villages not only planted profitable crops for the market, but also began establishing local factories. This was common in many parts of Guangdong. In Chao’an, just outside Shantou, where entire villages had been reduced to poverty after embroidery was declared ‘feudal’ at the height of the Cultural Revolution, historic links with the overseas community were revived after the Ministry of Light Industry lifted the trading restrictions in 1972.<sup>17</sup> Two years later up to half the women in some villages once again specialised in drawn work and embroidery. Their output was worth 1.3 million yuan on the foreign market. Others turned to manufacturing hardware and tools. But while some of these village enterprises were collectively owned, many merely used the appearance of a collective to run a business entirely along private lines. A good example was Dongli Village, where all but 40 of the 420 families were members of a nail factory. They worked from home and were paid by the piece. All the profits went straight to the individual workers, who were also responsible for finding the raw material. Some bought it from street pedlars, others obtained recycled iron from the black market, and a few went to Shantou to buy in bulk. A good worker made 5 to 10 yuan a day, the equivalent of what an ordinary farmer made by working in a commune for an entire month.<sup>18</sup>

The village enterprises contributed to the market in more than one way. They not only sold their wares through intermediaries, but also used their earnings to buy grain and fodder for their pigs, as well as imported goods that the planned economy could not provide, from fish oil to aspirin. They sent purchasing agents to compete with the state sector for scarce resources needed to run their businesses, buying up coal, steel and iron.<sup>19</sup>

These examples come from Guangdong, but rural enterprises were not limited to the south. In parts of Jiangsu, contracts were concluded between the production team and individual households as early as 1969, in blatant violation of the radical policies of the time. This process often began in regions where the land was unsuitable for agriculture. Along the coast, for instance, some villagers at first abandoned the sandy soil and switched to raising fish instead. Then they gradually turned their attention to industry. In Chuansha, where villagers were mandated by the state to grow cotton, the industrial portion of total production increased from 54 per cent in 1970 to 74 per cent five years later, a rate of growth far superior to the years of ‘economic reform’ after 1978. In contrast, in Songjiang county local leaders continued to obey the state’s call for grain.<sup>20</sup>

The growth of cottage industries in the Yangtze Delta followed old manufacturing habits and trading routes that predated liberation. They were revived as soon as the hand of the state weakened. Much as Shantou had a long tradition in exporting embroideries to overseas markets, for many centuries the villages around Shanghai had specialised in household goods, ceramics, cloth, silk and other handicrafts. Mechanisation spread from the late nineteenth century onwards, as simple devices for reeling silk, for instance, were incorporated into the village mills, diversifying production even further. Sophisticated guilds, chambers of commerce and banks in Shanghai, often with overseas connections, co-ordinated a flourishing trade. The Shanghai Silk Reeling Industry Trade Association, to name but one, promoted the production and commerce of silk in Shanghai, Jiangsu, Anhui and Zhejiang, before it was disbanded by the communists in 1949.

The extent to which rural industry reconnected with its past in the early 1970s is shown by statistics: in Jiangsu province as a whole, industry represented a mere 13 per cent of total output in the countryside in 1970, but a phenomenal 40 per cent by 1976. These factories were often collective, if in name only. Tangqiao village, with help from the cadres, established a metalworking factory with twenty-five employees in 1970. A year later, it set up a power plant as well as a cardboard-box factory, several other metal shops and an animal-feed processing plant. A brick factory followed in 1972, all of it in blatant disregard of the state’s demand that the countryside grow grain and Learn from Dazhai. The village leaders now attracted political attention and started opening new enterprises under the umbrella of a ‘comprehensive factory’. The façade of planned unity was abandoned the moment the Chairman died in 1976.<sup>21</sup>

There were also underground factories, dispensing altogether with the pretence of collective ownership. These, too, were run by village leaders. They had appeared during the Great Leap Forward, although many folded during the catastrophe that followed. As the sociologist Fei Xiaotong wrote of these clandestine enterprises, ‘peasants did not mind what the nature of ownership was. The only thing they did mind was to keep up their livelihood.’ Some were run by individuals, who merely used the name, and often the accountant, of the collective. In other words, they attached themselves to production teams and relied for protection on state officials.

Officials in the higher echelons of power could do very little to combat the trend. In Shanghai, Zhang Chunqiao fulminated about the ‘sprouts of capitalism in the countryside’. Others railed against the attack on the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. There were periodic campaigns to ‘cut the tail of capitalism’, but they were met with widespread sabotage, as villagers slaughtered their animals and diverted collective resources for their own use. Private firms went underground, at least temporarily until the storm blew over. Most of all, outside some of the cities where the radical followers of the Chairman were well entrenched, large parts of the countryside were no longer within their reach.<sup>22</sup>

When the garden economy created by private plots and rented land produced a surplus, villagers sometimes got on their bicycles and went to the city, selling vegetables, fruit, chickens, ducks and fish. A few took their produce from door to door, others gathered outside department stores, by railway stations or near the factory gates, sitting on kerbs and spreading out their wares on the ground or on small card tables. They were regularly chased away by public security services, but they kept on coming back. Sometimes the local authorities turned a blind eye, as people met at an agreed time to trade goods at makeshift bazaars.<sup>23</sup>

But villagers went further in restoring the links that had tied the countryside to the cities. They migrated in large numbers, despite the restrictions imposed by the household registration system. During the Great Leap Forward, millions of villagers had resettled in the cities, working in underground factories or on construction projects. Many were sent home during the famine, but they kept on coming back, carrying out the dirty, dangerous or demeaning jobs that city dwellers were unwilling to do. By the early 1970s, many villages had a well-established tradition of migration, knowing how to evade agents of the state, where to seek employment in the city and how to look after family members left behind. Sometimes the cadres themselves encouraged a form of chain migration by agreeing to take care of children and the elderly, as remittances from workers in the city contributed to the survival of the entire village. The migrants continued to submit their quota of grain, either through relatives or by paying a fee directly to the village leader.

Many millions evaded government control in the wake of the Lin Biao affair, seeping through the holes of the household registration system to settle in the very heart of the city or along its periphery. Circles of relative wealth appeared around the cities, as pedlars and farmers moved to fringe areas where they cultivated vegetables or manufactured small goods sold to urban residents. Some gave up on agriculture to set up food stalls or open small restaurants near the local markets.

Many lived in a twilight zone, constantly evading government control and running the risk of being sent back to their home villages, but large numbers managed to acquire the right to stay in the city. Not all of them were peasants. There were rural cadres keen to acquire urban residency, workers who had been sent to the Third Front and erstwhile city dwellers banned to the countryside after 1968. They pulled strings, offered bribes and pleaded with the authorities. Many of them were recruited by state enterprises, allowing factory leaders to cut labour costs. Those who were formally allowed to stay brought over friends and relatives from the village.

The numbers were staggering, counteracting the efforts the state had made to curb the urban population in 1968–9. In Shaanxi, major cities across the province grew by a quarter of a million people in 1970, and again by a third of a million the following year, reaching a total of 3.6 million. Once natural population growth and changes to the planned economy had been taken into account, it appeared that many were villagers, soldiers and cadres who had managed to bypass the restrictions imposed by the household registration system.<sup>24</sup>

It was the same elsewhere. In Hubei, the urban population grew by a mere third of a million between 1965 and 1970, but by half a million in the following two years. In 1972 alone, more than 300,000 people managed to acquire urban residency. A fifth of these permits were deemed to have been obtained fraudulently. There were also tens of thousands of people without any right of abode, including women married to urban residents and their children. On top of this, in 1971 and 1972 half a million farmers settled in the periphery, on the very edge of urban areas, many of them moving in and out of the city during the day or working on shifts overnight.<sup>25</sup>

Even in Beijing the authorities found it difficult to control the movement of people. By 1973, there were clusters of unemployed people openly wandering about the streets. Some were seeking work, others had secretly returned from exile to the countryside, while whole groups of migrants were in transit, on their way to Heilongjiang. By one estimate some 200,000 to 300,000 people passed through the capital every day. The burden was such that a year later, the Public Security Bureau employed more than 10,000 agents around the clock to try and keep the capital free of undesirable elements.<sup>26</sup>

Not only were more and more people ready to ignore the restrictions imposed on their freedom of movement by the household registration system, but they were also happy to travel for free. In Harbin, the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, the local authorities estimated that 1.3 million people travelled without a ticket in 1973. A more precise example comes from Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu: during a random check carried out on 14 October 1973, two out of every three travellers were unable to produce a ticket on demand. About a third of a million people also scrambled on board freight trains in Lanzhou that same year. The express train from Shanghai to Urumqi, on the other hand, was ‘frequently’ blocked by whole groups of people who forced it to slow down and then boarded without a ticket. In parts of the country, travelling for free became a habit, as people argued that ‘people’s trains’ were designed for ‘the people’. In the station in Zhengzhou, a major railway hub in Henan, over a thousand travellers rushed to get on a train without a ticket each and every day.<sup>27</sup>

The same was true of city transportation, as people boarded buses but refused to buy a ticket. Sometimes the ticket collector and even the driver were beaten up by irate passengers or gangs of thugs. In October 1973 alone, several dozen of them were publicly attacked in Jinan, the capital of Shandong, some of them injured so badly that they were unable to return to work.<sup>28</sup>

There was little that a weakened state could do to curtail the movement of millions of people, but there was a safety valve. In May 1970 the regime formally allowed some migrants to settle in Heilongjiang. With mountains covered in virgin larch, purple linden and Manchurian birch, the region had abundant natural resources that had already attracted people fleeing starvation in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. But for the most part the province remained an uninhabited wilderness. The state hoped that more riches would be tapped through voluntary resettlement – besides massive labour camps. The majority of migrants came from Shandong and Hebei, and many did not wait for the new state policy. In Zhaoyuan county alone, more than 2,000 people pulled up stakes in the single month of July 1969 and left in search of a better life in Heilongjiang. Some villages were almost emptied, as up to a third of the locals voted with their feet, including the accountant and all the party leaders.<sup>29</sup>

Dan Ling, the young man who had listened to a Japanese radio report announcing the death of Lin Biao, tried his luck after being released in January 1973. With other migrants he headed for Heilongjiang, described as a land of plenty for all. He and his fellow travellers slept on benches at a railway station until their situation had been legalised by the local government. After roaming the region for a while, Dan ended up in a Korean settlement where his engineering skills came in handy. All of them were poor, eating nothing but millet, but they were content, at last free members of a community in which ‘nobody felt inferior or humiliated for political reasons’. They did not share their tools.<sup>30</sup>

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Throughout the country people started quietly reconnecting with the past, from local leaders who focused on economic growth to villagers who reconstituted popular markets that had existed long before liberation. Sometimes a farmer merely pushed the boundaries of the planned economy by bringing some corn to market or spending more time on a private plot. In other cases they were bolder, opening underground factories or speculating in commodities normally controlled by the state. But everywhere, in one way or another, people were emboldened by the failure of the Cultural Revolution to take matters into their own hands. As one shrewd observer has noted, ‘people decided they did not want to go on living the way they were doing, and

they were setting up ways to get themselves out of their predicament'. It was an uneven, patchy revolution from below, and one that remained largely silent, but eventually it would engulf the entire country.<sup>31</sup>

## The Second Society

If a second economy was quietly finding solutions to the widespread misery created by central planning, a second society was appearing amid people disillusioned with the communist creed. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, a hidden, underground, largely invisible society lived in the shadow of the formal political system.

The phenomenon was not new. Much as a black market appeared the moment the communist party started to clamp down on basic economic freedoms in 1950, social activities condemned by the new regime continued to survive away from the public eye. When community festivals were stigmatised and cult leaders sent to re-education camps in the early years of liberation, popular religion went underground – quite literally. In north China underground chambers were built with tunnels long enough to connect strategic places throughout entire villages. In Hebei province, some sectarian leaders took refuge for over four years in shelters several metres below the surface. Christianity and Buddhism also had great staying power, as their followers quietly dropped all visible signs of allegiance but clung to their faith. A literary inquisition in the early 1950s consigned entire collections to the pulping press, while even seemingly innocuous titles were taken off the shelves, but for many years people continued to read forbidden books in secret, sometimes with little interference.<sup>1</sup>

The leadership was all too conscious of the extraordinary resilience of the old ideas and institutions it had tried to destroy wholesale after liberation. At the very heart of the Cultural Revolution lay the acknowledgement that despite seventeen years of communist rule, in the hearts and minds of many people the old society continued to exist. Underneath a surface of ideological uniformity lay a world of subcultures, countercultures and alternative cultures that posed a threat to the communist party. In official parlance, once the socialist transformation of the means of production had been completed, a new revolution was required to liquidate once and for all the last remnants of feudal and bourgeois thought, or else the forces of revisionism might very well prevail and undermine the entire communist enterprise.

But despite the house raids, the book burnings, the public humiliations and all the purges, not to mention the ceaseless campaigns of re-education, from study classes in Mao Zedong Thought to May Seventh Cadre Schools, old habits died hard. The Cultural Revolution aimed to transform every aspect of an individual's life, including his innermost thoughts and personal feelings, but in many cases it managed to exact only outward compliance. People fought deception with deception, lies with lies and empty rhetoric with empty slogans. Many were great actors, pretending to conform, knowing precisely what to say when required.

The second society was not so much a separate sphere as a realm of freedom that continued to exist in some people. Thanks to endless campaigns of thought reform, many individuals learned how to parrot the party line in public but keep their thoughts to themselves. All of them worshipped at the altar of the Chairman, although some quietly maintained faith in their own values, whether political or religious. There must have been many ordinary people who were crushed by the relentless pressure to conform, just as there were true believers or pure opportunists who enthusiastically followed every twist and turn in official ideology. But some people developed two minds or two souls, one for public view, the other strictly private, to be shared with trusted friends and family only. Some were able to move to and fro between these two realms, while others sank into apathy and depression, unable to reconcile the projected values of the world around them with their own beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

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Throughout the Cultural Revolution, propaganda trumpeted the importance of socialist education, both for young people who had never experienced the old world and for the older generation tainted by revisionist thoughts. But by the 1970s the educational system lay in ruins. Higher institutes of learning had all but closed down, with some of the best minds in the country confined to May Seventh Cadre Schools. As soon as they finished middle school, students were sent to the countryside for re-education by the peasants. When Jan Wong arrived at Peking University in 1972, one of the two foreign students to be accepted that year, she found a campus that was virtually deserted. The student body amounted to a few hundred, compared to an enrolment that normally ran into the thousands. 'Many buildings were padlocked. Lecture halls were empty. Until we arrived, Building Twenty-Five, a gray brick structure with a curved-tile roof, had been vacant for six years.'<sup>3</sup>

Many primary and middle schools had been invaded by Red Guards at the height of the Cultural Revolution, only to see their premises further encroached by a sprawling bureaucracy in the following years. In Jiangsu province, more than 700,000 square metres of school space had been lost by 1972, equivalent to tens of thousands of classrooms. Factories spilled over into primary schools, while government units converted lecture halls into office space.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics can be misleading, all the more so since most of the available figures were produced by the government for public consumption, but the archives offer some revealing glimpses. In Hebei province close to 8 million students went to school in 1965. Five years later this figure had been slashed to 6 million, or roughly a quarter less. But the biggest drop occurred in institutes of higher education, as the numbers dwindled from 27,000 on the eve of the Cultural Revolution to fewer than 5,000 in 1970.<sup>5</sup>

The education dispensed in schools, not to mention universities, emphasised ideology. In Shandong, around a third of all language lessons by 1975 were devoted to praising the achievements of the Cultural Revolution, and a further 17 per cent to the latest political campaign. In Jiangsu, half of the excerpts in textbooks adopted for language classes in 1972 were by Marx, Lenin and Mao, and a further one-third came from propaganda outlets like *Red Flag* and the *People's Daily*.<sup>6</sup>

Children may have been able effortlessly to recite passages from the Little Red Book, but otherwise the chaos of the Cultural Revolution did little to enhance their long-term academic development. In Nantong, near the river mouth of the Yangtze, some children could not say when the People's Republic had been established. In Jiangning, also in Jiangsu province, a few were unable to write their own names. This was the case with twenty of the fifty-four children in one class at the Dongtai Sancang Commune. Forty of them could not write arabic numbers.

Basic knowledge of geography was also patchy in middle schools, as some pupils could not even place Beijing on a map. In Funing county a few struggled to find their own country on a globe. In Nantong and Xuzhou many students had not learned how to add or subtract numbers. A test showed that not every middle-school student could tell how many minutes there were in an hour.

Some teachers were also barely literate. A detailed survey of schools in Jiangning county showed that roughly half of the staff could not write the names of many of the country's provincial capitals. In any event, as late as 1974 many of them still lived in fear of being denounced and persecuted, 'so they are very lenient and fail to correct students who make mistakes in writing or using the wrong characters'.<sup>7</sup>



These were not isolated examples. In Shandong, one-third of all young people and 60 per cent of adults were partly or wholly illiterate. In parts of the province, for instance the region of Linqin, half of all young people and two-thirds of all adults could not write their own name or read even a simple article from the *People's Daily*. These figures reflected a nationwide trend. As the State Council admitted, by 1978, as a result of the Cultural Revolution, the rate of illiteracy or semi-literacy reached 30 to 40 per cent among children and youths of all age groups across China. In parts of the country it was more than 50 per cent. Party members were no exception. In Hebei, regimented by 1.45 million cadres, one in three was illiterate. Few had graduated from high school.<sup>8</sup>

But even as general literacy was in decline, the opportunities to read forbidden literature paradoxically increased. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, as Red Guards went on a spree, trying to eradicate all signs of a feudal past, some of them quietly pocketed titles that attracted their attention. Many books were pulped or burned, but quite a few found their way on to a thriving black market. In Chengdu, as Jung Chang noted, all sorts of people could be found trading books, including 'Red Guards who wanted to make some cash from the books they had confiscated; frustrated entrepreneurs who smelled money; scholars who did not want their books to be burned but were afraid of keeping them; and book lovers'. Her brother went to the black market every day, trading his way up the ladder by selling books which he had obtained from a paper-recycling shop. He read voraciously, at the rate of one or two volumes a day, but never dared to keep more than a dozen or so at any one time, all of them carefully hidden.<sup>9</sup>

These underground readers were soon joined by others, as people became increasingly disillusioned with politics. After March 1967 some of the students started withdrawing from factional warfare, joining the ranks of those referred to as the 'free and unfettered'. To keep themselves occupied, they turned to reading a whole variety of books that were beyond their reach before the onset of the Cultural Revolution. Underground reading became even more common after the summer of 1968, as millions of young people exiled to the countryside circulated books among themselves to while away the long winter nights. Jung Chang, sent to a small village in Sichuan, had been given a whole stack of reading material by her brother. She was out in the fields every day, but itched to get back to them: 'In the placidity of the village, in the hushed depth of the nights in my damp home, I did a lot of reading and thinking.' Liang Heng, banned from Changsha, was lucky enough to be placed in a middle school, where he discovered a cache of books covered in dust and mildew in a storage room. His heart pounded, as a whole world of the imagination opened up to him: 'My life changed completely.'<sup>10</sup>

As the ideological climate relaxed in the wake of Lin Biao's death, the world of forbidden literature flourished yet further. While the contents of bookshops changed very little, with row after row of works by Mao, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, the range of books that circulated under the counter expanded enormously. Besides the banned books that had been rescued from private collections and public libraries, the state printed around a thousand translations of modern and contemporary writers for limited circulation, intended for the eyes of party members only. These books, too, found their way to the general public. The daughter of a leading official remembers that her father would lock the restricted books in a drawer, but failed to hide the key very well. She devoured Soviet novels, and was particularly struck by Ivan Shamiakin's *Snowy Winters*, dealing with the wrongful persecution of cadres in the Soviet Union. Jung Chang, on the other hand, relished Nixon's *Six Crises*, even if the translation came expurgated, while the descriptions of the Kennedy administration in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* made her marvel at the relaxed atmosphere of politics in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

One of the translations that had the biggest impact was William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, as it offered striking parallels with the Cultural Revolution. Harry Truman's *Memoirs*, Milovan Djilas's *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* and Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* were also welcome, helping readers to develop critical views of the communist revolution. The work of Trotsky, in a country where people were being shot for being Trotskyists, was also influential, not least his *The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is It Going?* as well as *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence*. There were also notable literary works, including Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.<sup>12</sup>

Banned books were sometimes copied by hand. There were even reading groups exchanging forbidden material and gathering to discuss common interests. One network of readers based in Beijing, with correspondents in other parts of the country, boldly called themselves the Fourth International Counter-Revolutionary Clique. Despite government suppression, these clubs continued to gain members, as a growing number of readers groped towards a critical perspective on the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

Not all the literature that circulated was equally high-minded. On the black market, novels with erotic passages commanded the highest prices, proportionate to the degree of political danger. In this puritanical society, even Stendhal's nineteenth-century classic *Le Rouge et le noir* was considered erotic, and a copy could command the equivalent of two weeks' wages for an ordinary worker. Erotic novels were copied by hand and sometimes even crudely mimeographed with simple stencils or hand-cranked devices. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, many units had begun publishing their own bulletins or newspapers. Some of that equipment had escaped from the hands of the Mao Zedong Thought propaganda teams and was now being put to good use, as erotic novels and lewd songs circulated in factories, schools and even government offices.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most widely read novels was *The Heart of a Maiden*, a story about a college girl and her sexual encounters with her cousin and other young men. The text was short and explicit, which may have accounted for its popularity. No one will ever know just how many copies circulated, but it may well have been one of the most studied texts after the Chairman's Little Red Book.<sup>15</sup>

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Throughout the Cultural Revolution, people also continued listening secretly to foreign radio broadcasts, despite the risk of being denounced by a neighbour and sentenced for a counter-revolutionary crime. The extent of the practice was revealed during the 'One Strike and Three Antis' campaign in 1970, when millions of ordinary people were persecuted for the merest hint of discontent with the party, whether real or imagined. In one factory in Gansu, deep inside the hinterland, one in every fifty workers listened to radio programmes broadcast from the Soviet Union, the United States, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan or India. There was also a Sichuan Underground Station and a Voice of the Liberation Army.<sup>16</sup>

Much as ordinary people had learned how to use printing equipment at the height of the Cultural Revolution, quite a few students had taken classes in radio broadcasting. Gao Yuan, the head of his school's radio club in Zhengding, was able to build everything from the simplest single-diode receiver to seven-transistor radios. The best devices picked up signals from Moscow.<sup>17</sup>

Radio clubs soon became suspect, but there was a thriving black market in radio transistors and semi-conductors. On Fuzhou Street in Shanghai, young people keen to pursue their hobby could meet factory workers who stole the required parts. The authorities repeatedly tried to stamp out the trade, but to no avail.<sup>18</sup>

Their attempt to jam the Voice of America and radio signals from Taiwan was also futile. In the airwave war, no technology existed to prevent strong and stable signals from reaching most listeners. In an odd twist, by reducing the cost of a radio the regime actually made listening to short-wave programmes from abroad easier. In the countryside, just before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, a set could cost the equivalent of a whole pig, a luxury few families could afford. The range varied from 300 to 500 kilometres, meaning that cities like Yining were out of range of the provincial



capital Urumchi and did not enjoy daytime reception. In order to spread Mao Zedong Thought, the price was cut by more than a third in following years, and by 1970 four-transistor radios were sold below cost of production in many parts of the country.<sup>19</sup>

Several years later, wired networks reached a majority of the population in entire provinces, supported by broadcasting stations in county towns and amplifying stations in people's communes. Even poor villagers were never far removed from the propaganda. In Hubei, in 1974, there were over 4.8 million loudspeakers, compared to a mere 180,000 prior to the Cultural Revolution. It was equivalent to almost one per household.<sup>20</sup>

Still, the din of the propaganda machine could not drown out a diversity of waves, local and foreign. Even in poor regions like Hainan, the subtropical island off the coast of Guangdong, people occasionally listened to the Voice of the Liberation Army, which was vehemently hostile to Mao Zedong. There was also a Voice of Communist Youth, which broadcast seditious slogans at irregular intervals throughout the day. The station was believed to be run by graduate students of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. In Guangzhou itself, taxi drivers were openly tuning their radios to Hong Kong programmes. They were not alone. By now, even dedicated party officials were lured by foreign radio, if only because they were keen to discover what was happening in their own country. The same young woman who found Ivan Shamiakin's *Snowy Winters* in a drawer at home one day walked into her parents' room without knocking on the door, only to hear a bright voice calling out: 'This is Radio Moscow!'<sup>21</sup>

Other social activities condemned by the state flourished. There were underground singing clubs, as people gathered under the pretext of singing revolutionary songs, only to enact forbidden plays and sing banned tunes. In the Shanghai Number Two Machine Tool Plant, a group of a hundred young workers played forbidden music every Friday in the winter of 1969–70, attracting a lively audience from other factories.<sup>22</sup>

The old world made a comeback, as people reconnected with pastimes decried as feudal or bourgeois by the Red Guards years earlier. The only widespread children's game by the time of Lin Biao's death was skipping, but soon enough whips and tops, hopscotch and diabolo could be seen in the streets of Beijing. The sale of traditional, painted silk kites was still restricted to foreigners, but some children knew how to fly ingenious contrivances made of strips of wood and bits of the *People's Daily*. Poker appeared in the narrow, winding alleys of the capital. Pigeons could be seen racing across the sky with small bamboo pipes attached to their tail feathers, producing an eerie, harmonious whistle. People started keeping birds in cages again, sometimes heading for the parks in the early morning to air their pets.<sup>23</sup>

Ordinary people became underground artists, seeking refuge from politics in art by painting in a manner deliberately detached from the 'socialist realism' that shaped everything at the time, from the propaganda posters festooned on walls to the 'people's art' officially sponsored by the party. Many were deliberately apolitical, trying to carve out a personal space in which they could reconnect with their inner selves. Their art was clandestine, but like the underground literary salons and singing clubs, informal groups of amateur artists shared their interests, using abandoned factories, deserted parks or private flats in buildings with adequate dark hallways and isolated staircases. Art books and exhibition catalogues were circulated, as people reconnected with everything Western from Michelangelo to Picasso, but also with Chinese traditional paintings.

In Beijing some of these budding artists, all from very diverse backgrounds, came together in a group which received a name only much later: Wuming, or Nameless. 'In an era when free association was a crime, the group had to be nameless, shapeless and spontaneous. There were no regulations, no membership, no unified artistic principles or style.' Many of them came from families defined as 'class enemies' and had endured broken homes, ravaged schools and crumbling communities throughout the Cultural Revolution. They took to the brush, at first honing their skills by following the propaganda campaign and painting portraits of the Chairman. It was a good source of precious oil paint and linen canvas, which they used to begin experimenting in their spare time. Nature was a favourite theme, from peach blossoms and lilacs observed in the Botanical Garden to the sunsets seen from the Ming tombs in the suburbs of Beijing. On one occasion, several members forged a letter of introduction to get past public security and made a trip to the seaside at Beidaihe on National Day. But they also painted from memory, carving a personal realm deep inside themselves. Wang Aihe, herself an accomplished painter and member of Wuming, remembers a fellow factory worker who stared for hours through the window, pondering how to paint a tree he could see in the distance.<sup>24</sup>

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Religion also went underground, allowing people to remain secretly connected to their faiths, both organised creeds including Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam, and folk religions with their local gods and deities.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, there were even occasional spurts of popular protest. In Hebei, to take but one example, in 1969 Christians openly shouted, 'I don't believe in Mao Zedong, I believe in God!' Elsewhere in the province, slogans appeared on May Day, proclaiming 'Celebrate God the Creator'. But these were isolated incidents, quickly suppressed by the omnipotent military. In most cases, especially in the countryside, ordinary villagers carried on exercising their faiths in a quiet, indirect, non-confrontational way.<sup>25</sup>

In many cases, religious leaders were impotent, but ordinary villagers continued with their beliefs. Ironically, denominations that had borne the brunt of persecution in the 1950s were better prepared for the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution. This was the case for Watchman Nee and the Little Flock, which had been one of the fastest-growing native Protestant movements in China up to 1949, when it boasted as many as 70,000 followers. Within the first five years of liberation, most leaders of the Little Flock were arrested and the congregations systematically crushed. Watchman Nee died in prison in 1972. But ordinary followers viewed the persecution as a test of their faith, organising cell groups and home meetings many years before the Cultural Revolution even began. A pragmatic tradition of clandestine worshipping allowed them to survive.<sup>26</sup>

Other organised religions resorted to similar strategies, adopting a decentralised approach with clusters of worshippers dispersed throughout the countryside. Lamas, imams and priests may well have been in re-education camps, but ordinary followers stepped in to hold their communities together. They also recruited new members among the ever growing number of victims of the Cultural Revolution, offering an explanation for their suffering, a sense of hope and sometimes a promise of salvation or inner peace. Most of all, with government offices in charge of religious affairs in turmoil, besieged by rebels or imploding under the weight of factional infighting, denominations of every hue resurfaced and reorganised themselves, laying a firm foundation for religious revival after the death of Mao Zedong.

Local gods were also stubborn, subverting attempts by the state to replace them with the cult of Mao. In some villages, local festivals and public rituals were discontinued, while temples were closed down, but many villagers continued to worship at a small shrine or altar inside their home. They burned incense, offered vows, invoked the spirits or otherwise communicated with a whole variety of local gods away from the public eye, from ancestral spirits, patron deities and rain gods to fertility goddesses. The ultimate act of subversion was probably to turn the Chairman himself into a local deity. But larger statues also survived, even as temples were often demolished or turned into granaries. In some cases they were moved from one place to another, until by 1972 local communities felt it safe enough to give them a more permanent home. Sometimes a temple was built with collective funds under the pretence of establishing a school, a trend that could be observed throughout Pingliang county in Gansu, and no doubt in other parts of the country.<sup>27</sup>

Folk culture, often intertwined with local religion, also remained resilient, even at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Jiang Qing had made one of

her first public appearances at the Peking Opera festival in the summer of 1964, determined to reform traditional opera, one of the most popular art forms in the countryside. Soon enough she banned all opera with the exception of eight revolutionary dramas which glorified the People's Liberation Army and Mao Zedong Thought. The Eight Model Operas appeared on posters, postcards, stamps, plates, teapots, vases and calendars. They were played by special performing troupes in schools and factories. Zhai Zhenhua, who was sent to Yan'an to till the fields, was lucky enough to be selected by a travelling troupe. They presented their show to factory workers and commune peasants on crude stages in open fields. 'The audience was usually large but applause was sparse. The opera was never really welcomed anywhere except, believe it or not, at Yan'an University.'<sup>28</sup>

But despite all the state propaganda, some communities still went ahead and stuck to their own traditions. In 1968, several villages joined forces in Zhejiang and organised huge gatherings around a performance of traditional opera, with cigarettes and wine laid out on hundreds of tables for honorary guests and local families alike. In Jiangxi, a much poorer province than Zhejiang, there were also occasions on which thousands of people gathered openly to enjoy a traditional play. In parts of the countryside, commune members routinely celebrated traditional festivities and prayed to the local gods and spirits. Some villages had a common fund to allow dragon-boat competitions, which were attended by large crowds, as pigs were slaughtered and food was piled on the tables in a conspicuous display of consumption. By the early 1970s, besides opera performers, a whole range of traditional specialists, including folk musicians, geomancers, spirit mediums and fortune tellers, were making a living in the countryside.<sup>29</sup>

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Underground churches are sometimes called house churches, as small groups of believers gathered secretly in private homes to share their faith. While religion could no longer openly function as a social bond holding entire communities together, it survived as a more personal, private experience, retreating from the church, the temple or the mosque into the realm of the home. Paradoxically, as the Cultural Revolution attacked the very notion of privacy as a bourgeois concept, people from all walks of life tried to turn their homes into fragile islands of freedom. This was not easy, especially in the cities where apartments and houses were often shared by several families, while prying eyes and gossiping neighbours were a nuisance everywhere. Still, literary salons, reading clubs and underground artists, like religious believers, sometimes managed to gather clandestinely in a private home, even if they had to change venues regularly to avoid detection.

But it was families rather than religious groups or underground clubs that stubbornly perpetuated their beliefs in the relative privacy of their home. The educational system may have been in disarray, but home schooling allowed some parents to instil the values they cherished into their offspring. Across the country, many millions of children were not allowed to go beyond elementary education because of their bad class background. Not only were they spared much of the state propaganda, but family members sometimes educated them at home. Mothers in particular played an important role, drawing on a rich culture of family education, since their status in the traditional household had often depended on the academic success of their offspring. Liu Wenzhong, who belonged to a family ostracised as 'counter-revolutionaries' in Shanghai, was schooled at home and taught to value human rights and democracy.<sup>30</sup>

Well before liberation, a whole range of traditional skills had also been developed and transmitted through family ties. Sometimes several households or even entire villages specialised in producing paper umbrellas, cloth shoes, silk hats, rattan chairs, wicker creels or twig baskets for the market. Throughout the Cultural Revolution some families continued to maintain their skills, from crafting protective charms and printing popular almanacs to making paper lanterns. Many other skills were family based, for instance martial arts, traditional theatre or opera singing.

The family, of course, endured sustained attack during the Cultural Revolution. Some households were divided right through the middle, as members pledged allegiance to different factions or were caught up in the shifting currents of local politics. Senseless and unpredictable purges were designed to cow the population and rip apart entire communities, producing docile, atomised individuals loyal to no one but the Chairman. Family members were expected to denounce each other at public struggle meetings, and spouses were often enjoined to seek a divorce when their partners were shipped away to the gulag. Most of all, particularly in the cities, many households were ruthlessly broken up, as their members were sent to different parts of the countryside. Children were wrenched away as soon as they graduated from middle school, their parents sometimes split up and confined to different re-education camps. Ordinary workers ended up in improvised factories on the Third Front, while government employees were re-educated by the peasants in Mao Zedong Study Classes or May Seventh Cadre Schools. In Sichuan, Jung Chang's parents were separated and held in two labour camps, controlled directly by the Tings, while her four siblings were tilling the fields in remote villages far away from Chengdu.

But China has one of the world's most complex kinship systems, fine-tuned over many centuries by a sophisticated lexicon with separate designations for almost every family member according to their gender, relative age, lineage and generation. Filial piety was a linchpin of Confucian ethics, while extended families in the form of clans and lineages formed the backbone of a millennial empire that collapsed only in 1911. As a result, families proved to be remarkably resilient. In some cases they actually became closer. Jung Chang and her siblings learned how to look after each other, and became more united by frequently visiting their parents in camp.<sup>31</sup>

The strength of the family bond was clearly demonstrated by the paucity of children who actually denounced their parents. Propaganda was replete with examples of young pioneers who chose loyalty to the state above duty to a parent. In the Soviet Union the case of Pavlik Morozov, a teenage boy killed by relatives in 1932 for having informed on his own father, became a cause célèbre. Though mythical, the story was endlessly exploited by the state. In the cult of Pavlik Morozov, children were encouraged to replace the family bond with one fealty alone, namely to Stalin.<sup>32</sup>

Propaganda in China was equally vociferous. Already during the Socialist Education Campaign, the slogan 'Father is Close, Mother is Close, but Neither is as Close as Chairman Mao' was inculcated into every child. As one student noted, 'We were drilled to think that anyone, including our parents, who was not totally for Mao was the enemy.' Parents themselves encouraged their children to conform to official ideology, recognising that this was the best option to safeguard their future.<sup>33</sup>

Yet in the Soviet Union fanatical denunciations of parents were actually rather unusual. Even fewer cases can be documented for the Cultural Revolution. Those rare children who actually informed on their own relatives were often ostracised. Ma Dingan, who reported his father for dealing in ration coupons on the black market, was expelled from his home, repudiated by the villagers and confined to an abandoned temple, and even local party officials refused to have anything to do with him.<sup>34</sup>

An even more striking case is that of Zhang Hongbing, who as a boy aged fifteen shopped his own mother, demanding that she be shot for her counter-revolutionary crimes. The party granted his wish. The woman, whose only crime was to have thrown portraits of the Chairman into the fire, was executed by firing squad. The son became the object of a cult, briefly celebrated for his revolutionary fervour by the local party committee, before being persecuted himself as the son of a counter-revolutionary element. For decades Zhang was tormented by a guilty conscience, finally coming forward in 2013 to make a public confession in the hope of assuaging his pain. By going public he discovered that he was the only case of a son who had actually demanded the death penalty for a close relative. In China as in the Soviet Union, more often than not the norm for young people was to renounce family members rather than denounce them.<sup>35</sup>

Even outside the family, an old code of loyalty occasionally survived, as people stood by their friends or colleagues. Jung Chang was allowed to visit

her father on a regular basis thanks to a squad leader in his late twenties who did his best unobtrusively to improve the lot of the people he knew. One translator working in Beijing remembers how she was shunned by her colleagues at work after she became a victim of the campaign to cleanse the ranks in 1969. But their family members, all living in the same compound, carried on as if nothing had happened, helping her with discreet gifts of rationed items. As memoirs and interviews amply testify, there were also random acts of kindness among complete strangers.<sup>36</sup>

In its effort to atomise society, the regime took sword and fire to traditional social bonds, but it failed to destroy the family. Not only did family ties endure, but new bonds were forged. The regime frowned on romantic relationships, and married couples rarely displayed their affection in public during the Cultural Revolution. Love was considered a decadent, bourgeois emotion, and sex was taboo. Many students grew up in sheer ignorance of the most basic physiological facts. Zhuo Fei, for one, was terrified that she might become pregnant after sharing a bicycle with a young man, but she was too afraid to ask anybody, even her own relatives. Rae Yang, the Red Guard from Beijing who had relished the opportunity to go to Manchuria, put it in a nutshell: ‘We did not have sex or even think about it. Sex was bourgeois. No doubt about it! In my mind, it was something very dirty and ugly. It was also extremely dangerous. In the books I read and the movies I saw, only the bad guys were interested in sex. Revolutionaries had nothing to do with it. When revolutionaries fell in love, they loved with their hearts. They didn’t even touch hands.’<sup>37</sup>

But like so many other students banned to the countryside, Rae learned quickly by watching the farm animals. She was put in charge of breeding boars, having to guide their quivering genitals into a sow’s vagina. ‘It was like watching pornographic movies day in and day out.’ Others found out by reading *The Heart of a Maiden*. Once Lin Biao had vanished, young people began to meet socially and quietly pair up, seeking privacy away from collective dormitories and crowded dining halls. In Manchuria, with temperatures plunging to 30 degrees below zero, young couples on state farms had little choice but to take to the great outdoors. Despite the cold they persisted, rushing back to the dormitories to embrace the heaters after less than twenty minutes.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, for students who did not work on agricultural collectives controlled by the army, living among the villagers instead, the opportunities for sexual encounters were much greater. In some cases young people even lived together, a practice unimaginable in the cities. A few had children out of wedlock, refusing to marry for fear of being stuck in the countryside for ever.

But most of all, except for students from the cities, the vast majority of people in the countryside were far less coy about sex. When they first arrived among their peasant hosts, quite a few young students were taken aback by their open displays of affection. One day Wang Yuanyuan, a sixteen-year-old girl sent to Inner Mongolia, saw a couple making love by the side of a ditch and reported the affair to the brigade leader. ‘The old peasants, though, didn’t treat it as anything and just laughed.’ As in so many other aspects of folk culture, the Cultural Revolution ran no more than skin deep.<sup>39</sup>

## Reversals

The thaw was followed by a freeze. Already in December 1972, the Chairman began worrying that the attack on Lin Biao was undermining the whole Cultural Revolution. At the Tenth Congress, held in Beijing in August 1973, the party constitution was revised to strike out Lin Biao and the principal members of his 'anti-party clique'. The Chairman instead elevated Wang Hongwen, the head of security from the Number Seventeen Cotton Textile Mill who had led the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai. In a great show of political theatre, Wang put the Chairman's vote for the new Central Committee in the ballot box, indicating that he had been personally picked to be Mao's successor. In a delicate balance of power, the old guard, including Deng Xiaoping, Li Jingquan, Ulanfu and Tan Zhenlin, were brought back. But they ranked low in the party hierarchy, overshadowed by members of the old Cultural Revolution Group, including Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Kang Sheng, all placed in strategic positions designed to contain Zhou Enlai.

The premier himself was increasingly isolated. Mao was wary of his efforts to rehabilitate veteran cadres and restore order to the economy, fearing that the moment he died Zhou would reverse the Cultural Revolution, threatening his political legacy. Zhou had always been loyal, but this was due to pure political calculation, not ideological conviction. As one biographer has put it, 'Always the humble gentleman, practicing tolerance and personal endurance, always considerate and balanced, but profoundly smooth and sophisticated, Zhou, in Mao's view, was really a phony.'<sup>1</sup>

In January 1974, Mao set Jiang Qing and her allies upon the premier, accusing him indirectly of being a modern-day Confucius. The campaign to criticise Lin Biao became a campaign to criticise both Lin Biao and Confucius. *Red Flag*, the *People's Daily* and the *Liberation Army Daily* published a joint editorial, stating that 'the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in political ideology is a long, complicated and sometimes acute struggle . . . The reactionaries both in and out of China and the leaders of various opportunist lines in China's history all worship Confucius.' The propaganda machine never mentioned Zhou Enlai by name, but spewed venom against the ancient sage, denounced for representing an old, aristocratic order and devoting his time to 'reviving the doomed dynasty and recalling those retired from the world'.<sup>2</sup>

Slogans appeared condemning the premier's efforts to open the country. A lightning rod for the campaign against foreign culture was the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, who had toured China at the invitation of Zhou Enlai and made a documentary about his trip. In January 1974 Antonioni was denounced as 'anti-Chinese' and 'anti-communist', even though no one in China had heard of him or seen the film. Blind worship of foreign machinery, another dig at the premier, was castigated, in particular in Shanghai. Jiang Qing herself mocked those who 'sniff foreigners' farts and call them sweet'.<sup>3</sup>

Wang Hongwen, closely associated with Jiang Qing and now the latest political star, called the campaign a 'second Cultural Revolution' and even revived the slogan 'To Rebel is Justified'. There were the usual mass meetings, wall posters and newspaper editorials aimed at the forces of revisionism. In Beijing, some schoolchildren once again smashed classroom windows, tables and chairs. In the provinces, some former rebels saw another opportunity to challenge those in authority and 'seize power', reviving the heady days of the Cultural Revolution. In Hangzhou, a mass rally organised by erstwhile rebel leaders attracted thousands of their followers in schools and factories alike. Encouraged by Wang Hongwen, they proclaimed their 'right to rebel against reactionaries' and launched an all-out attack against local officials, crippling the economy and paralysing the party structure. Several charismatic leaders managed to overthrow their enemies in power, becoming de facto leaders of the province. They toured the local army camps, undermining the military leaders they viewed as the main stumbling block in their ascent to power.

In Wuhan, former rebel forces also used widespread popular support to confront the local leadership and gain access to the corridors of power. In Nanjing, on the other hand, it was not so much former rebels as victims of the repression against May Sixteenth Elements who used the campaign to take on military leaders. Tens of thousands of people who had been forcibly relocated to the countryside flocked back to the city, blocking the railway traffic and demonstrating for weeks on end in their demands for redress.<sup>4</sup>

The campaign succeeded in pushing Zhou Enlai to the side and neutralising his growing influence over the party. But Jiang Qing overreached, trying to extend her grip on the party and the army. In July 1974 Mao intervened and blamed his wife for allowing the whole affair to veer out of control.

In order to balance the two factions inside the party further, Mao restored Deng Xiaoping to his office of vice-premier. In a sleight of hand, it was Deng rather than Zhou, the architect of the country's foreign relations and the main diplomat behind the rapprochement with the United States, who was sent to head the Chinese delegation at the United Nations in April 1974. Half a year earlier, on the occasion of another visit by Kissinger, the premier's handling of the United States had come under fire, and Deng Xiaoping had been one of those joining Jiang Qing and Yao Wenyuan in criticising the premier. His performance had been sufficiently vicious to lead many cadres in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to believe that Deng Xiaoping had been brought back by the Chairman specifically to check Zhou Enlai.<sup>5</sup>

Zhou Enlai himself had been diagnosed with bladder cancer in 1972, but his medical team had not told him of his condition and the Chairman denied him adequate treatment. In May 1974 his cancer spread to other parts of his body, but still major surgery was ruled out. He continued to work despite constant loss of blood, remedied by daily transfusions. His first proper operation came in June, but it was too late, and signs of metastasis into other major organs were discovered a few months later. His last public appearance was on 30 September 1974, at a state banquet on the eve of National Day. Frail and thin, he appeared in front of 4,500 people, including more than 2,000 foreign guests. Those present also included several dozen party officials making their first appearance since the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

This event seemed a sign that genuine political change was once again in the air. The campaign against Confucius had managed to paralyse several provincial capitals, but by and large it was viewed with apprehension. Few people wanted another Cultural Revolution. In the eyes of many, Zhou Enlai represented a counterbalance to Jiang Qing and her leftist allies. But by now it had become public knowledge that the man who was popularly viewed as the chief obstacle against a return to another Cultural Revolution had been hospitalised. 'People everywhere looked to express the anxiety they felt, while offering Zhou their personal respect and blessings.' That day, the real hero was not the Chairman but the premier, as guests stood up and applauded him when he made his appearance at the state banquet, chanting in unison, 'Premier Zhou! Premier Zhou!'<sup>7</sup>

Mao did not attend the reception under pretext of ill-health, observing Zhou from a distance. The outburst of popular adulation forced him to tone down the attacks on the premier. He reorganised the central leadership instead, making Deng Xiaoping a vice-premier as a counterweight to Zhou Enlai. But Jiang Qing felt that she had not been given her proper reward. She had started to compare herself to the only empress ever to have ruled in Chinese history, namely Wu Zetian. Articles praising the sixth-century empress as a great unifier of the nation appeared in the press, even though she was popularly reviled as a ruthless, wicked ruler who had mercilessly crushed her opponents. Madame Mao had several imperial gowns tailored after those of the empress, although she never wore them in public. She held court, receiving a stream of foreign visitors and signing her photographs in imperial



red.

She was also paranoid about a palace coup. Fearing an attack from the sky, she had guns on swivel bases mounted on the roof of the Spring Lotus Chamber, her main residence in the Diaoyutai compound. She relied heavily on a whole range of medications, but became convinced that her medical team was trying to kill her.<sup>8</sup>

Madame Mao resented Deng Xiaoping and tried to sabotage the new power structure. Mao had constantly to intervene as an arbiter, eventually warning his wife not to form a gang with her supporters from Shanghai, namely Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan. They would later be called the ‘Gang of Four’.

In January 1975, Zhou left the hospital to give one of his final speeches at the National People’s Congress. He called on the country to modernise entire fields that were lagging behind the rest of the world, in particular agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology. With the approval of the Chairman, he called the programme the ‘Four Modernisations’.

Deng Xiaoping increasingly took charge, in practice running daily affairs. His work style was the opposite of Zhou Enlai. His experience of the Cultural Revolution seemed to have left him unfazed, despite the rough treatment meted out to him and his family, including a son crippled by Red Guards. He charged ahead, unafraid of alienating his opponents on the way. He was sweeping in his approach, and did not hesitate to stand up to Madame Mao.

Deng wasted no time in getting the transportation system back on track, threatening harsh punishment for railway officials who failed to get the trains moving on schedule. Thousands of people suspected of looting or blocking freight trains were sent to prison in early 1975, while eighty-five offenders were executed. He then turned to industry, warning leading officials in the iron and steel industry that they were ‘weak, lazy and lax’. He demanded that they tackle labour disruptions and political infighting and focus on meeting the latest steel quota, imposing strict deadlines and sending high-powered work teams to impose compliance. He pruned the management of the giant Anshan Iron and Steel Corporation in Liaoning province, resulting in a streamlined command structure similar to that in existence before the Cultural Revolution.

Deng also intervened in provinces still reeling from the effects of the second Cultural Revolution. It was he who put heavy pressure on the rebels in Hangzhou, who were still paralysing much of Zhejiang province. In the first quarter of 1975 alone, industrial output had dropped by 20 per cent, with the revenue collected by the province almost halved due to factional fighting. Deng dispatched a team that raided the headquarters of the rebel faction and arrested several of its leaders. A massive campaign to denounce ‘factionalism’ took place in the province over the summer. The fate of the main rebel in Hangzhou was sealed by the Chairman himself, who described him as an ‘evil person’.<sup>9</sup>

Deng also ordered the military to attack Shadian, a Muslim-dominated county in Yunnan, where ethnic unrest had broken out after the villagers had refused to pay any further grain tax until the freedom of religion granted in the constitution had been honoured. A large armed force moved in, razing entire villages to the ground. More than 1,600 people were killed, including hundreds of children and elderly attempting to flee.<sup>10</sup>

But even as Deng appeared to have the support of the Chairman, quelling popular unrest, arresting major rebels and removing procrastinating cadres, Jiang Qing launched a new campaign, this time against ‘empiricism’. It was a barely veiled attack on Deng Xiaoping, targeting his focus on economic growth at the expense of communist ideology. Once again strutting the stage at the Great Hall of the People in front of assembled workers, Madame Mao identified ‘empiricism’ as the great enemy, the accomplice of revisionism that must be struck down. The Gang of Four controlled the press and most major publications, organising party hacks to contribute a steady flow of denunciatory articles. Deng had to plead with the Chairman, who intervened to declare that opposing revisionism meant opposing both empiricism and dogmatism – the last term being a coded reference to Madame Mao and her three acolytes from Shanghai, whom the Chairman was now calling the ‘Gang of Four’. Mao was playing off one faction against the other in the hope that none would be strong enough to challenge him.<sup>11</sup>

But Mao did have a change of heart. One victim of Deng Xiaoping’s bruising approach was the Chairman’s nephew Mao Yuanxin, a young man who had made a name for himself as party secretary of the provincial revolutionary committee in Liaoning. He was scathing of Deng Xiaoping’s interference with the Anshan Iron and Steel Corporation, and poured poison in his uncle’s ear after becoming one of his private liaison officers in September 1975. A new wind, he told the Chairman, was blowing, and it went against the Cultural Revolution. ‘I have been paying great attention to the speeches Comrade Xiaoping makes, and I see a problem in that he rarely brings up the achievements of the Great Cultural Revolution or criticises Liu Shaoqi’s revisionist line.’ The vice-premier, he alleged, was actually doing even more damage than the premier. A whole new bourgeois class was emerging inside the party, he intimated, and Deng Xiaoping had become their spokesman.<sup>12</sup>

Mao was rattled, but decided that Deng could still be saved. The Chairman, by now, suffered from undiagnosed Lou Gehrig’s disease, which left his mental faculties intact but caused a gradual deterioration of the nerve cells controlling his muscles, including his throat, pharynx, tongue, diaphragm and rib muscles. He could barely stand unaided, and needed oxygen to breathe. He was fed a liquid diet of chicken broth through a nasal tube. He communicated through the only person who could understand his slurring speech, namely Zhang Yufeng, the train attendant he had seduced more than twenty years earlier.

Sensing that his end was near, Mao wished to cement his legacy, especially where the Cultural Revolution was concerned. His own verdict was that it had been 70 per cent successful and 30 per cent a failure, but he sought a formal resolution to preclude a sweeping reversal after his death. Mao decided to test Deng Xiaoping’s loyalty by asking him to chair a gathering of the party elders to consider what the verdict on the Cultural Revolution should be. But at the meeting on 20 November, Deng refused to be drawn, even turning down a request to supervise the drafting of the resolution. It was a direct affront to the Chairman.

On the very same day, hundreds of big-character posters went up at Tsinghua University in a concerted effort to denounce those who dared to ‘negate the Cultural Revolution’ and ‘attack the proletarian revolution in education’. They were the culmination of a year-long campaign to undermine Deng Xiaoping. In Shanghai, tightly controlled by the Gang of Four, newspaper headlines and voices from loudspeakers had been screaming daily, ‘Hit back at the rightist wind of reversing the verdict of the Cultural Revolution!’ People who incurred the displeasure of the radicals were accused of attempting to ‘negate the Cultural Revolution’, which became the slogan of the day. Once again, people ‘bowed their heads and walked on tiptoe, fearful of treading on dangerous ground or appearing less than totally submissive’. As the tension was cranked up, endless Politburo meetings were organised in Beijing to take Deng Xiaoping to task. He said very little. He offered a limited self-criticism in December, and again in January 1976, but the Chairman deemed it insufficient.<sup>13</sup>

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Zhou Enlai passed away on 8 January 1976, thin and shrivelled by three separate cancers but still handsome. Instead of naming Wang Hongwen as acting premier, or appointing a veteran cadre close to Deng Xiaoping, Mao turned to an individual who stood outside the two camps. Hua Guofeng, a tall, amiable lightweight who years earlier had built a sprawling memorial hall in Shaoshan dedicated to the Chairman, stepped into the breach.

The Chairman also did all in his power to prevent Zhou Enlai from stealing his thunder, even in death. A brief radio broadcast announced the



premier's passing, but there was no lying in state. Madame Mao and her followers tried to forbid the wearing of black armbands and white chrysanthemums, announcing that there was no need for any memorial service other than the official one. People expressed their anger and indignation as they queued for food or waited for buses. A few brave souls complained loudly and bitterly.<sup>14</sup>

Still, despite all the efforts of the Gang of Four, there was an outpouring of popular emotion. Zhou Enlai had become a symbol of moderation. Many saw him as the only leader who had tried to mitigate the disaster of the Cultural Revolution. He stood for hope. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets, standing in the icy wind to bid farewell to the premier, even though the route to the cemetery had been kept secret. Many had tears in their eyes as the hearse passed by. One foreign student at Peking University was overwhelmed by the reaction to the premier's death: 'I had never seen such universal grief. It seemed everyone was weeping, men and women, old people and children. Some were almost hysterical. Bus drivers, street sweepers and shop clerks all went about their chores with swollen red eyes.' In what would be his last public appearance for a year, Deng Xiaoping delivered a eulogy. He was relieved of his duties as vice-premier a few days later.<sup>15</sup>

Popular resentment mounted against Madame Mao and her cronies, who now enjoyed the upper hand and increased their attacks on Deng Xiaoping. Even the senile, sick Chairman seemed unable to rein in Jiang Qing. With Zhou Enlai dead and Deng Xiaoping purged once again, people became anxious, fearing for the future.

As the Qingming festival approached, they rebelled. On Tomb Sweeping Day, as the ancient tradition of honouring deceased relatives was also known, families usually gathered to weed graves, clean or touch up headstones and offer flowers to their ancestors. The festival fell on 4 April, but weeks before people had already started displaying wreaths with eulogies for Zhou Enlai. In Nanjing, an elegiac couplet honouring the premier was removed from the Cemetery for Revolutionary Martyrs, prompting students to put up a slogan the following day. They boldly proclaimed their willingness to 'Defend Zhou Enlai with our Lives!'

But what really infuriated ordinary people was an editorial published in Shanghai on 25 March, calling Zhou Enlai a 'capitalist roader inside the party' who had wanted to help Deng Xiaoping the 'unrepentant capitalist roader' regain power. The newspaper was bombarded with letters, telegrams and telephone calls objecting to the article. In Nanjing, students marched on the Cemetery for Revolutionary Martyrs holding a giant portrait of the deceased premier, defying a ban imposed by the local authorities. Soon the entire city was plastered in slogans attacking the Gang of Four. Some people shouted 'Down with Jiang Qing!', and others demanded the overthrow of Zhang Chunqiao. The protesters spread their message to the rest of the country by daubing slogans on the sides of trains and long-distance buses. In Wuxi, an industrial city roughly 200 kilometres to the east of Nanjing, a sea of humanity poured into Red Square, brandishing portraits of the premier and loudly broadcasting a recording of Deng Xiaoping's eulogy.<sup>16</sup>

Trains from Nanjing on their way to the capital were stopped in Tianjin and coated in green paint. But in the capital too, people had started leaving wreaths at the base of the Monument to the People's Heroes, a towering obelisk in Tiananmen Square. They were confiscated by the Public Security Bureau, but still mourners thronged to the square with poems, flowers and wreaths, sometimes tying their tributes with wire to the white, marble railings surrounding the monument to prevent the security forces from removing them. Volunteers stood guard. On 31 March, poems attacking 'Jiang Qing the witch' appeared. Some 4,000 policemen and militia workers were deployed two days later, while the municipal party committee banned government units from sending wreaths, merely encouraging more protesters to join the fight, as poetry and flowers became weapons used against the Gang of Four.<sup>17</sup>

The festival fell on a Sunday. Hundreds of thousands of people streamed into the square, hanging posters on flagpoles and piling wreaths around the monument. Some released bundles of brightly coloured balloons carrying streamers with tributes to Zhou Enlai, hoping that they could be seen from the Chairman's residence in Zhongnanhai. A young man standing on a pedestal, leading several thousand people in singing a slow lament, was deliberately dressed in a traditional gown. On that drizzling day, he held a traditional, oil-paper umbrella, using his archaic appearance to remind the crowd that students had demonstrated against their rulers in the original Tiananmen Square decades earlier, on 4 May 1919. Others were more blunt, holding up a microphone to attack 'the new Empress Dowager'. One student brandished a piece of white brocade on which he had written in blood a pledge to defend the premier. But the atmosphere remained solemn, as people from all walks of life, from high officials in expensive woollen overcoats to ordinary villagers in drab cotton clothing, quietly defied the will of their supreme leader.<sup>18</sup>

The Politburo convened the same day, condemning the incident as counter-revolutionary. Mao Yuanxin reported the decision to his uncle, who approved. In the early hours of 5 April, the police started cleaning the square, loading all the wreaths in a fleet of 200 lorries and using fire hoses to remove the slogans from the walls of the monument. Within hours, enraged demonstrators clashed with the police. Both sides called for reinforcements. Later that day cars were set on fire and a command post was looted.

By the evening more than 10,000 policemen and five battalions of security forces were on standby. Warning messages were broadcast continuously through loudspeakers from 6.30 p.m. onwards, condemning the incident as a 'reactionary plot' and calling on the crowd to disperse. A few hours later, militias armed with clubs and iron bars moved to strategic positions around the square. At 9.30 p.m. the floodlights were suddenly switched on. The square was sealed off, and more than 200 people who remained inside were beaten, dragged away by force and arrested. From the Great Hall of the People, Jiang Qing observed the events through a pair of binoculars. Later that night she joined her husband for a celebratory meal of peanuts and roast pork. Offering a toast of fiery rice wine, she declared that 'We are victorious.' Just before midnight, a hundred public security officers moved through the square in line abreast, watering and mopping up the blood.<sup>19</sup>

Mao, still clear-headed at this point despite his physical deterioration, was convinced that Deng Xiaoping was behind the incident. Deng was dismissed from all his posts, but retained his party membership. A nationwide crackdown followed, as thousands were arrested for counter-revolutionary crimes. Many more were interrogated. In Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei, every person known to have visited the capital was investigated. In schools, factories and offices across Beijing, people were asked about their participation in the Tiananmen incident. More than 100,000 were made to march through the city with red banners condemning Deng Xiaoping. 'We marched with resentment,' remembered one participant.<sup>20</sup>

Across the nation, people who were asked to denounce the erstwhile vice-premier showed resistance, chatting, reading, knitting or even sleeping through the proceedings. Those asked to stand up and speak in public meetings read their prepared scripts in a flat, emotionless voice. Nobody was duped, and the campaign fell flat. People were waiting for the end. In Chengdu, crowds often appeared in the streets, having heard that Mao was about to die.<sup>21</sup>

## Aftermath

Natural catastrophes, according to imperial tradition, are harbingers of dynastic change. On the early morning of 28 July 1976, a giant earthquake struck Tangshan, a coal city on the Bohai Sea just over 150 kilometres east of Beijing. The scale of the devastation was enormous. At least half a million people died, although some estimates have placed the death toll at 700,000.<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1974, seismographic experts had predicted the likelihood of a very large earthquake in the region within the next two years, but owing to the Cultural Revolution, they were hopelessly short of modern equipment and trained personnel.<sup>2</sup>

Few preparations were made. Tangshan itself was a shoddily built city, with pithead structures, hoist towers and conveyor belts looming over ramshackle, one-storey houses. Below ground there was a vast network of tunnels and deep shafts. In one terrible instant, a 150-kilometre-long fault line ruptured beneath the earth, inflicting more damage than the atomic bombs dropped on either Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Asphalt streets were torn asunder and rails twisted into knots. The earth moved with such lightning speed that the sides of trees in the heart of the earthquake zone were singed. Some houses folded inwards, others were swallowed up. Roughly 95 per cent of the 11 million square metres of living space in the city collapsed.

As soon as the tremor subsided, a freezing rain drenched dazed survivors, blanketing the city in a thick mist mingled with the dust of crumbled buildings. For an hour Tangshan remained shrouded in darkness, lit only by flashes of fire in the rubble of the crushed houses. Some survivors burned to death, but many more were asphyxiated. ‘I was breathing in the ashes of the dead,’ one victim, then a boy aged twelve, remembered.<sup>3</sup>

Death was everywhere. ‘Bodies dangled out of windows, caught as they tried to escape. An old woman lay in the street, her head pulped by flying debris. In the train station, a concrete pillar had impaled a young girl, pinning her to the wall. At the bus depot, a cook had been scalded to death by a cauldron of boiling water.’<sup>4</sup>

The earthquake could not have struck at a worse moment. Beijing was paralysed by the slow death of the Chairman, surrounded by doctors and nurses in Zhongnanhai. Mao felt the quake, which rattled his bed, and must have understood the message. Many buildings in the capital were shaken violently, overturning pots and vases, rattling pictures on the wall, shattering some glass windows. Many residents refused to return to their homes, sleeping on the pavements under makeshift plastic sheets until the aftershocks subsided. Instead of broadcasting the news, some neighbourhood committees turned on the loudspeakers to exhort the population to ‘criticise Deng Xiaoping and carry the Cultural Revolution through to the end’. The insensitivity of the authorities to the plight of ordinary people caused widespread anger.<sup>5</sup>

It was weeks before the military authorities, hampered by lack of planning, poor communication and the need to receive approval for every decision from their leaders in Beijing, responded effectively. The rescue was strategic. Tangshan was a mining powerhouse that could not be abandoned, but villagers in the surrounding countryside were left to cope alone. Offers of aid from foreign nations – search teams, helicopters, rescue equipment, blankets and food – were flatly rejected by Hua Guofeng, who used the opportunity to assert his own leadership and suggest national self-confidence. Lacking professional expertise and adequate equipment, the young soldiers relied on muscle power to pull some 16,000 people from the ruins, a fraction of those recovered earlier by the very victims themselves. The People’s Liberation Army covered tens of thousands of bodies with bleaching powder and buried them in improvised graveyards outside the city. No national day of mourning was announced. The dead were hardly acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>

A few minutes past midnight on 9 September 1976, the line on the monitor in Beijing went flat. It was one day after the full moon, when families traditionally gathered to count their blessings at the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Jan Wong, the foreign student who had arrived at Peking University in 1972, was cycling to class when she heard the familiar chords of the state funeral dirge on the broadcasting system. The usually strong voice of the Central Broadcasting Station was now full of sorrow, mournfully announcing the death of the Chairman. ‘We announce with the deepest grief that Comrade Mao Zedong, our esteemed and beloved great leader, passed away ten minutes after midnight.’ Other cyclists looked shocked, but not sad. In the classroom, her fellow students were dry-eyed, busy making white paper chrysanthemums, black armbands and paper wreaths. ‘There were no gasps or tears, just a sense of relief.’ It was a stark contrast with the outpouring of grief at the premier’s death nine months earlier.<sup>7</sup>

In schools, factories and offices, people assembled to listen to the official announcement. Those who felt relief had to hide their feelings. This was the case with Jung Chang, who for a moment was numbed with sheer euphoria. All around her people wept. She had to display the correct emotion or risk being singled out. She buried her head in the shoulder of the woman in front of her, heaving and snivelling.<sup>8</sup>

She was hardly alone in putting on a performance. Traditionally, in China, weeping for dead relatives and even throwing oneself on the ground in front of the coffin was a required demonstration of filial piety. Absence of tears was a disgrace to the family. Sometimes actors were hired to wail loudly at the funeral of important dignitaries, thus encouraging other mourners to join in without feeling embarrassed. And much as people had mastered the art of effortlessly producing proletarian anger at denunciation meetings, some knew how to cry on demand.

People showed less contrition in private. In Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, liquor sold out overnight. One young woman remembers how her father invited his best friend to their home, locked the door and opened the only bottle of wine they had. The next day, they went to a public memorial service where people cried as if they were heartbroken. ‘As a little girl, I was confused by the adults’ expressions – everybody looked so sad in public, while my father was so happy the night before.’<sup>9</sup>

Still, some people felt genuine grief, in particular those who had benefited from the Cultural Revolution. And plenty of true believers remained, especially among young people. Ai Xiaoming, a twenty-two-year-old girl eager to enter the party and contribute to socialism, was so heartbroken that she wept almost to the point of fainting.<sup>10</sup>

But in the countryside, it seems, few people sobbed. As one poor villager in Anhui recalled, ‘not a single person wept at the time’.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not they shed tears, by the time the state funeral was held in Tiananmen Square on 18 September, most people had collected their emotions. The entire leadership was present, with the exception of Deng Xiaoping, still under house arrest. Luo Ruiqing, one of the first leading officials to have become a victim of the Cultural Revolution, insisted on attending the funeral in his wheelchair. He still adored the man who had persecuted him, and he cried. Hua Guofeng used the occasion to exhort the masses to continue the campaign against Deng Xiaoping. At precisely three o’clock, he announced three minutes of silence. Silence fell over the country, as railway stations came to a standstill, buses pulled over to the side of the road,

workers downed their tools, cyclists dismounted and pedestrians stopped in their tracks. Then Wang Hongwen called out, 'First bow! Second bow! Third bow!' A million people in the square bowed three times before the giant portrait of Mao hanging from the rostrum.<sup>12</sup>

It was the last public display of unity among the leaders before the big showdown. Even as the Chairman's body was being injected with formaldehyde for preservation in a cold chamber deep beneath the capital, different factions were jockeying for power. The Gang of Four controlled the propaganda machine, and cranked up the campaign against 'capitalist roaders'. But they had little clout within the party, and no influence over the army. Their only source of authority was now dead, and public opinion was hardly on their side. With the exception of Jiang Qing, their power base was in Shanghai, a long way from the capital where all the jousting for control took place.

Most of all, they underestimated Hua Guofeng. A mere two days after Mao's death, the premier quietly reached out to Marshal Ye Jianying, by now in charge of the Ministry of Defence. He also contacted Wang Dongxing, Mao's former bodyguard who commanded the troops in charge of the leadership's security. On 6 October, less than a month after the Chairman's death, a Politburo meeting was called to discuss the fifth volume of *Mao's Selected Works*. Members of the Gang of Four were arrested one by one as they arrived at the meeting hall. Madame Mao, sensing a trap, stayed away, but was arrested at her residence.

After the official announcement on 14 October, firecrackers exploded all night. Stores sold out not only of liquor, but of all kinds of items, including ordinary tinned food, as people splurged to celebrate the downfall of the Gang of Four. 'Everywhere, I saw people wandering around with broad smiles and big hangovers,' one resident recalled.<sup>13</sup>

There were official celebrations too, 'exactly the same kind of rallies as during the Cultural Revolution'. In Beijing, columns of hundreds of thousands of people waved huge banners denouncing the 'Gang of Four Anti-Party Clique'. A mass rally was held on Tiananmen on 24 October, as the leaders made their first public appearance since the coup. Hua Guofeng, now anointed as chairman of the party, moved back and forth along the rostrum, clapping lightly to acknowledge the cheers and smiling beatifically, very much like his predecessor.<sup>14</sup>

In Shanghai, posters were plastered on buildings along the Bund up to a height of several storeys. The streets were choked with people exulting over the fall of the radicals. Nien Cheng was forced to join a parade, carrying a slogan saying 'Down with Jiang Qing'. She abhorred it, but many demonstrators relished the opportunity, marching four abreast with banners, drums and gongs.<sup>15</sup>

The political campaigns did not cease. 'Instead of attacking Deng, we now denounced the Gang of Four.' Madame Mao and her three fanatical followers became scapegoats, blamed for all the misfortunes of the past ten years. Some people found it difficult to separate Mao from his wife, but the strategy had its advantages. As one erstwhile believer put it, 'It is more comfortable that way, as it is difficult to part with one's beliefs and illusions.'<sup>16</sup>

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Deng Xiaoping returned to power in the summer of 1977, much to Hua Guofeng's disappointment. Chairman Hua's portrait now hung next to that of Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square. He slicked his hair to resemble the Great Helmsman, and posed for staged photos, uttering vague aphorisms in the style of his former master. But while the propaganda machine churned out posters exhorting the population to 'Most Closely Follow our Brilliant Leader', the new chairman lacked the institutional clout and political charisma to shore up his power. His clumsy attempt at a cult of personality alienated many party veterans. His reluctance to repudiate the Cultural Revolution was out of tune with a widespread desire for change. Hua was easily outmanoeuvred by Deng, who had the support of many of the older party members humiliated during the Cultural Revolution.

Ordinary people also viewed Deng as a saviour. Many of those wronged in one way or another during the Cultural Revolution pinned their hopes on the man who had survived three purges. Millions of students exiled to the countryside, most of them former Red Guards, were streaming back into the cities, worried about their future. They were joined by tens of thousands of ex-convicts, released from the gulag after suffering wrongful imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution. People from all walks of life petitioned the government for redress, from impoverished villagers who accused local leaders of rape, pillage and murder to the victims of political intrigue in the higher echelons of power. In the capital a shanty town mushroomed, as petitioners camped outside the State Council.<sup>17</sup>

Not far away, a mere kilometre to the west of Tiananmen Square, a long brick wall near an old bus station in Xidan became the focal point for popular discontent with the status quo. In October 1978, a few months before an important party gathering, handwritten posters went up, attracting a huge crowd of onlookers, warmly bundled up against the cold. Some of the demonstrators demanded justice, putting up detailed accounts of their personal grievances. Others clamoured for the full rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping and other senior officials like Peng Dehuai, purged for having stood up to Mao during the Great Leap Forward. Rumours even circulated that the vice-premier stood behind the people, having told a foreign journalist that 'The Democracy Wall in Xidan is a good thing!' Deng's own slogan, 'Seek Truth from Facts', seemed promising. There were calls for universal suffrage, with one electrician from the Beijing Zoo named Wei Jingsheng asking for a 'Fifth Modernisation: Democracy', to supplement Zhou Enlai's Four Modernisations.<sup>18</sup>

Deng Xiaoping used the Democracy Wall to shore up his own position at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, held two months later in December 1978. Hua retained many of his titles, but Deng effectively took control of the party. It was Deng who went to the United States in February 1979, thrilling the American public when he donned a cowboy hat at a rodeo in Texas. He circled the arena in a horse-drawn stagecoach, waving to the crowd, and generally charmed business leaders and politicians during his stay.

When Deng returned home, he found growing unrest. The Democracy Wall had been transformed into a hotbed of dissent, as several demonstrators led by a construction worker who had been raped by a party secretary organised a protest march through Tiananmen Square on the anniversary of Zhou Enlai's death. They were arrested, but their daring opposition to the communist party inspired others. In a poster entitled 'Democracy or New Dictatorship', Wei Jingsheng branded Deng Xiaoping a 'fascist dictator'.

There was to be no democracy, and Wei Jingsheng was rounded up together with dozens of other dissidents, some to be imprisoned for twenty years. As one disillusioned observer put it, 'The old guard reverted to the old way of managing the country.' A year later, Peng Zhen, the mayor of Beijing who had been one of the first targets of the Cultural Revolution, moved to eliminate once again four basic rights codified into the constitution after the death of Mao. The rights of citizens to 'speak out freely, air their views fully, engage in great debates and write big-character posters', heralded by the Chairman in 1966, were blamed for having contributed to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The right to strike was abolished a year later.<sup>19</sup>

Still, every dictator has to differentiate himself from his predecessor, and Deng was keen to draw a line under the Cultural Revolution. Since roughly half of all members had joined the communist party since 1966, and most of the old guard had at one point or another been tainted by the sordid politics of the Cultural Revolution, a systematic attempt to call perpetrators to account would have led to a gigantic purge. There were many rehabilitations, but very few prosecutions. Liu Shaoqi, together with all his followers, was formally exonerated in February 1980.

The most politically expeditious way of assigning blame without implicating either the communist party or the founding father of the regime was to put the Gang of Four on trial. In November 1980, Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen and Yao Wenyuan entered a courtroom at Justice Road near Tiananmen Square, accused of masterminding a decade of murderous chaos. Madame Mao was defiant, hurling abuse at her accusers. At one point she



quipped that ‘I was Chairman Mao’s dog. I bit whomever he asked me to bite.’ Behind the scenes, a special team headed by Peng Zhen orchestrated the show trial. Jiang Qing and Zhang Chunqiao were given the death penalty, commuted to life imprisonment. Ten years later, in 1991, Jiang Qing hanged herself inside her cell with a rope made of her own socks and a few handkerchiefs. Wang Hongwen died in prison the following year. But Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao were released after serving twenty years, living out their lives under tight police surveillance.

Other prominent members of the Cultural Revolution Group were also condemned, including Chen Boda. The Chairman had already placed him behind bars in 1970, and he would not be released until 1988.

Lacking any independent legal system, party officials at every level decided who would be punished and who would not. ‘Some rebels were rightly punished. Some got rough justice. Others were let off lightly.’<sup>20</sup>

In July 1981, to mark its sixtieth birthday, the party issued a formal resolution on its own history. The document barely mentioned Mao’s Great Famine and blamed Lin Biao and the Gang of Four for the Cultural Revolution, while largely absolving the Chairman. Mao’s own verdict on the Cultural Revolution was used by Deng to evaluate the entire role of the Chairman in the history of the communist party. It was exactly the same assessment that Mao had given of Stalin, namely 70 per cent successful and 30 per cent a failure.

The resolution was designed to terminate all public debate about the party’s own past. Academic research on major issues such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution was strongly discouraged, and any interpretation that strayed from the official version was viewed with an unsympathetic eye.<sup>21</sup>

But the document also had other goals, more closely linked to current politics than to past history. Deng Xiaoping used the resolution to criticise Hua Guofeng and establish his own credentials as paramount leader. The reign of Chairman Hua was lumped together with the Cultural Revolution, while the Third Plenum in December 1978 was consecrated as the ‘Great Turning Point in History’, when under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping the party finally embarked on the ‘correct path for socialist modernisation’.

This path involved a programme based on Zhou Enlai’s Four Modernisations. Its most remarkable feature was how reluctantly economic reforms were introduced. By 1976, much of the country was reeling from three decades of economic mismanagement and years of political chaos. But change from above was slow in coming. The Third Plenum was not so much a ‘Great Turning Point in History’ as an attempt to restore the planned economy to its pre-Cultural Revolution days. Deng Xiaoping and his acolytes were looking back, not forward. In agricultural policy, they revived the various measures taken in 1962 to protect the countryside from the radical collectivisation that had run amok during the Great Leap Forward. Small private plots were once again allowed, but the leadership explicitly prohibited dividing the land. In April 1979 it even demanded that villagers who had left the collectives rejoin the people’s communes. But it did make one concession: three years after Mao’s death, the party finally increased by 20 per cent the price of the grain sold compulsorily to the state. The prices charged for agricultural machinery, fertilisers and pesticides were also reduced by 10 to 15 per cent.<sup>22</sup>

Real change was driven from below. In a silent revolution dating back at least a decade, cadres and villagers had started pulling themselves out of poverty by reconnecting with the past. In parts of the countryside they covertly rented out the land, established black markets and ran underground factories. The extent and depth of these liberal practices are difficult to gauge, as so much was done on the sly, but they thrived even more after the death of Mao. By 1979, many county leaders in Anhui had no choice but to allow families to cultivate the land. As one local leader put it, ‘Household contracting was like an irresistible wave, spontaneously topping the limits we had placed, and it could not be suppressed or turned around.’ In Sichuan, too, local leaders found it difficult to contain the division of the land. Zhao Ziyang, who had arrived in Sichuan in 1975 to take over as the head of the provincial party committee, decided to go with the flow.<sup>23</sup>

By 1980, tens of thousands of local decisions had placed 40 per cent of Anhui production teams, 50 per cent of Guizhou teams and 60 per cent of Gansu teams under household contracts. Deng Xiaoping had neither the will nor the ability to fight the trend. As Kate Zhou has written, ‘When the government lifted restrictions, it did so only in recognition of the fact that the sea of unorganised farmers had already made them irrelevant.’<sup>24</sup>

In the winter of 1982–3, the people’s communes were officially dissolved. It was the end of an era. The covert practices that had spread across the countryside in the last years of the Cultural Revolution now flourished, as villagers returned to family farming, cultivated crops that could be sold for a profit on the market, established privately owned shops or went to the cities to work in factories. Rural decollectivisation, in turn, liberated even more labour in the countryside, fuelling a boom in village enterprises. Rural industry provided most of the country’s double-digit growth, offsetting the inefficient performance of state-owned enterprises. In this great transformation, the villagers took centre stage. Rapid economic growth did not start in the cities with a trickle-down effect to the countryside, but flowed instead from the rural to the urban sector. The private entrepreneurs who transformed the economy were millions upon millions of ordinary villagers, who effectively outmanoeuvred the state. If there was a great architect of economic reform, it was the people.<sup>25</sup>

Deng Xiaoping used economic growth to consolidate the communist party and maintain its iron grip on power. But it came at a cost. Not only did the vast majority of people in the countryside push for greater economic opportunities, but they also escaped from the ideological shackles imposed by decades of Maoism. The Cultural Revolution in effect destroyed the remnants of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Endless campaigns of thought reform produced widespread resistance even among party members themselves. The very ideology of the party was gone, and its legitimacy lay in tatters. The leaders lived in fear of their own people, constantly having to suppress their political aspirations. In June 1989, Deng personally ordered a military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing, as tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square. The massacre was a display of brutal force and steely resolve, designed to send a signal that still pulsates to this day: do not query the monopoly of the one-party state.

## Preface

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Chapter 18: More Purges

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Chapter 19: Fall of an Heir

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## Archives

### *Non-Chinese Archives*

PRO, Hong Kong – Public Record Office, Hong Kong  
PRO – The National Archives, London

### *Provincial Archives*

Gansu – Gansu sheng dang'anguan, Lanzhou

- 91 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei (Gansu Provincial Party Committee)
- 93 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei xuanchuanbu (Gansu Provincial Party Committee's Department for Propaganda)
- 96 Zhonggong Gansu shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Gansu Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)
- 129 Gansu sheng geming weiyuanhui (Gansu Province Revolutionary Committee)
- 144 Gansu sheng jihua weiyuanhui (Gansu Province Planning Committee)
- 180 Gansu sheng liangshiting (Gansu Province Bureau for Grain)
- 192 Gansu sheng shangyeting (Gansu Province Bureau for Commerce)

Guangdong – Guangdong sheng dang'anguan, Guangzhou

- 217 Guangdong sheng nongcunbu (Guangdong Provincial Bureau for Rural Affairs)
- 231 Guangdong sheng zonggonghui (Guangdong Province Federation of Trade Unions)
- 235 Guangdong sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Guangdong Provincial People's Congress)
- 253 Guangdong sheng jihua weiyuanhui (Guangdong Province Planning Committee)
- 314 Guangdong sheng jiaoyuting (Guangdong Province Bureau for Education)

Hebei – Hebei sheng dang'anguan, Shijiazhuang

- 879 Zhonggong Hebei shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Hebei Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)
- 919 Hebei sheng geming weiyuanhui (Hebei Province Revolutionary Committee)
- 921 Hebei shenggewei shengchanbu yuanhui (Hebei Province Revolutionary Committee's Bureau for Production)
- 925 Hebei sheng nongye shengchan weiyuanhui (Hebei Province Committee on Agricultural Production)
- 926 Hebei sheng caizheng maoyi weiyuanhui (Hebei Province Committee on Finances and Trade)
- 940 Hebei sheng jihua weiyuanhui (Hebei Province Planning Committee)
- 942 Hebei sheng tongjiju (Hebei Province Office for Statistics)
- 979 Hebei sheng nongyeting (Hebei Province Agricultural Bureau)
- 997 Hebei sheng liangshiting (Hebei Province Bureau for Grain)
- 999 Hebei sheng shangyeting (Hebei Province Bureau for Trade)

Hubei – Hubei sheng dang'anguan, Wuhan

- SZ1 Zhonggong Hubei sheng weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial Party Committee)
- SZ29 Hubei sheng zonggonghui (Hubei Province Federation of Trade Unions)
- SZ34 Hubei sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Hubei Provincial People's Congress)
- SZ75 Hubei sheng liangshiting (Hubei Province Bureau for Grain)
- SZ81 Hubei sheng shangyeting (Hubei Province Bureau for Trade)
- SZ90 Hubei sheng gongyeting (Hubei Province Bureau for Industry)
- SZ107 Hubei sheng nongyeting (Hubei Province Agricultural Bureau)
- SZ115 Hubei sheng weishengting (Hubei Province Bureau for Health)
- SZ139 Hubei sheng geming weiyuanhui (Hubei Province Revolutionary Committee)

Hunan – Hunan sheng dang'anguan, Changsha

- 146 Zhonggong Hunan shengwei nongcun gongzuobu (Hunan Provincial Party Committee Department for Rural Work)
- 163 Hunan sheng renmin weiyuanhui (Hunan Provincial People's Congress)
- 182 Hunan sheng laodongju (Hunan Province Office for Labour)
- 194 Hunan sheng liangshiju (Hunan Province Office for Grain)

Jiangsu – Jiangsu sheng dang'anguan, Nanjing

- 4007 Jiangsu sheng minzhengting (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Civil Affairs)
- 4013 Jiangsu sheng jiaoyuting (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Education)
- 4016 Jiangsu sheng wenhuating (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Culture)
- 4018 Jiangsu sheng weishengting (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Health and Hygiene)
- 4028 Jiangsu sheng jiansheting (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Construction)
- 4060 Jiangsu sheng liangshiting (Jiangsu Province Bureau for Grain)

Shaanxi – Shaanxi sheng dang'anguan, Xi'an

- 123 Zhonggong Shaanxi shengwei (Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee)
- 144 Shaanxi sheng jiaotongting (Shaanxi Province Transportation Bureau)
- 194 Shaanxi sheng nongyeting (Shaanxi Province Agricultural Bureau)
- 215 Shaanxi sheng shangyeting (Shaanxi Province Bureau for Trade)

Shandong – Shandong sheng dang'anguan, Jinan

- A1 Zhonggong Shandong shengwei (Shandong Provincial Party Committee)
- A27 Shangdong sheng wenhuaju (Shandong Province Office for Culture)

A29 Shandong sheng jiaoyuting (Shandong Province Education Bureau)  
A47 Shandong sheng geming weiyuanhui (Shandong Province Revolutionary Committee)  
A103 Shandong sheng tongjiju (Shandong Province Office for Statistics)  
A108 Shandong sheng jingji weiyuanhui (Shandong Province Economic Commission)  
A131 Shandong sheng liangshiting (Shandong Province Bureau for Grain)  
A147 Shandong sheng xinfangju (Shandong Province Office for Visits)  
Sichuan – Sichuan sheng dang’anguan, Chengdu  
JC1 Zhonggong Sichuan shengwei (Sichuan Provincial Party Committee)  
Zhejiang – Zhejiang sheng dang’anguan, Hangzhou  
J116 Zhejiang sheng nongyeting (Zhejiang Province Bureau for Agriculture)

*Municipal Archives*

Nanjing – Nanjing shi dang’anguan, Nanjing, Jiangsu  
4003 Nanjing shiwei (Nanjing Municipal Party Committee)  
5003 Nanjing shi renmin zhengfu (Nanjing Municipal People’s Government)  
5013 Nanjing shi laodongju (Nanjing Municipal Office for Labour)  
5020 Nanjing shi jingji weiyuanhui (Nanjing City Economic Commission)  
5023 Nanjing shi tongjiju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Statistics)  
5038 Nanjing shi qingongyeju (Nanjing Municipal Bureau for Light Industry)  
6001 Nanjing shi zonggonghui (Nanjing Municipal Federation of Trade Unions)  
  
Shanghai – Shanghai shi dang’anguan, Shanghai  
A36 Shanghai shiwei gongye zhengzhibu (Shanghai Municipal Party Committee’s Bureau for Industry and Politics)  
A38 Shanghai shiwei gongye shengchan weiyuanhui (Committee for Industrial Production of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee)  
B1 Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu (Shanghai Municipal People’s Government)  
B3 Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui wenjiao bangongshi (Bureau for Culture and Education of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress)  
B6 Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui cai liang mao bangongshi (Bureau for Finances, Grain and Trade of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress)  
B45 Shanghai shi nongyeting (Shanghai Municipality’s Bureau for Agriculture)  
B50 Shanghai shi renwei jiguan shi wu guanliju (Bureau for Office Work of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress)  
B74 Shanghai shi minbing zhihui bu (Shanghai City’s Militia Command Post)  
B92 Shangha shi renmin guangbo diantai (Shanghai City Radio)  
B98 Shanghai shi di’er shangyeju (Shanghai City’s Number Two Bureau for Trade)  
B104 Shanghai shi caizhengju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Finance)  
B105 Shanghai shi jiaoyuju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Education)  
B109 Shanghai shi wuzi (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Goods and Materials)  
B120 Shanghai Shi renmin fangkong bangongshi (Shanghai Municipal Office for Air Defence)  
B123 Shanghai shi diyi shangyeju (Shanghai City’s Number One Bureau for Trade)  
B127 Shanghai shi laodongju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Labour)  
B134 Shanghai shi fangzhi gongyeju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Textile Industry)  
B163 Shanghai shi qingongyeju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Light Industry)  
B167 Shanghai shi chubanju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Publishing)  
B168 Shanghai shi minzhengju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Civil Administration)  
B172 Shanghai shi wenhua ju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Culture)  
B173 Shanghai shi jidian gongye guanliju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Machinery and Electronics)  
B182 Shanghai shi gongshanghang guanliju (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Supervision of Business)  
B227 Shanghai shi geming weiyuanhui laodong gongzizu (Shanghai Municipal Revolutionary Committee’s Team on Wages)  
B228 Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu zhishi qingnian shangshan xiaxiang bangongshi (Bureau for Sending Educated Youth to the Countryside of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Government)  
B244 Shanghai shi jiaoyu weisheng bangongshi (Shanghai Municipal Bureau for Education and Health)  
B246 Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu jingji weiyuanhui (Committee on the Economy of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Government)  
B248 Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu caizheng maoyi bangongshi (Office for Finance and Trade of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Government)  
B250 Shanghai shi nongye weiyuanhui (Shanghai Municipal Committee on Agriculture)

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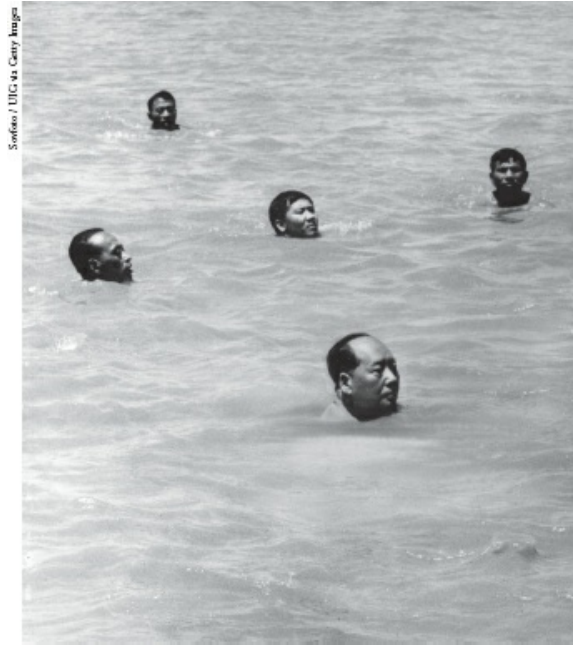
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## Plate Section



Sofoco / UIG via Getty Images

16 July 1966, Mao Zedong swims in the Yangtze to signal his determination to carry through the Cultural Revolution.



Thousands follow the Chairman's example.



Mao Zedong and Lin Biao drive through an enthusiastic crowd of Red Guards on Tiananmen Square, Beijing, on 18 August 1966.



afmcmhhl / afmcmhhl via Getty Images

Mao Zedong and Lin Biao review more than a million Red Guards from the rostrum on Tiananmen Square, 18 August 1966.



Song Binbin pins a Red Guard armband on the Chairman's sleeve as they stand on the Tiananmen rostrum, 18 August 1966.





The party secretary of Harbin has his face blackened, is forced to wear a dunce cap and has a placard placed around his neck for being a 'black gang element', 26 August 1966.



Richard Hwang/Photo: Xinhua/Contour Images

A building covered in big character posters extolling the Cultural Revolution, Guangzhou, 1966.



People read posters, anonymous denunciations and news bulletins to keep up with the Cultural Revolution, Beijing, August 1966.



Official parade in Beijing to mark National Day, 1 October 1966.



Late 1966, a propaganda squad of Red Guards and students brandishes copies of the *Little Red Book* to spread Mao's thought.





Крыжановский / Славян-Крыжановский / Getty Images

The army distributes Mao's *Little Red Book*.



A group of Red Guards parades through a village with portraits of Chairman Mao, 1967.



26 April 1967: Leading members of the Cultural Revolution Group, including, from left to right, Zhou Enlai, Jiang Qing (Madam Mao), Chen Boda and Kang Sheng.



© Li Zhenbang / China and Photo Images from Red Color News Editor (Photo.com, 1998)

Two leaders of a rebel faction are denounced in public, January 1967.



Execution of people condemned as 'counter-revolutionaries' on the outskirts of Harbin, 5 April 1968.





A young boy paints a slogan over wall posters.



© Li Zhenheng / Contact Press. Images from Red Guard News Soldier (Thailand, 2013)

Hospital patients make their morning pledge of loyalty to Mao's picture, October 1968.

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People watch on as soldiers make their pledge of allegiance, October 1968.

© Li Zhenheng / Communist Press Images from Red Cube News Service (Beijing, 2015)



The villagers of a commune just outside Harbin pin some 170 badges on the cap and uniform of a model soldier, April 1968.

© Li Zhenheng / Contact Press. Image from Red-Collar News Soldier (Puduan, 2013)



March 1973: model worker Guo Fenglian visits an air-raid shelter project, as the country hunkers down in anticipation of a major war.





1973, Hui county, Henan province: work to build a tunnel.



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Young students exiled to the countryside join local villagers to work on a terraced field, Baiquan county, November 1975.



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China mourns Mao Zedong's death, September 1976.



**Library of**  
**POLITICAL  
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**4**

**CHINESE  
COMMUNISM  
AND  
CHINESE  
JEWS**

**SERIES OF AUTHOR  
ITSVAN BAKONY**





# CHINESE COMMUNISM AND CHINESE JEWS

The Israelite leader Israel Joseph Benjamin II, Chacham of Israel, after his visit to China at the middle of last century, says in his report on Chinese clandestine Judaism, presented to the western Israelite leaders, that in one epoch the Chinese Jews mixed themselves with the population of the mongolic race through mixed marriages: **"They keep their faith with the characteristic tenacity distinguishing the Hebrew race, they even now do not marry but women of their same religion". . . "During the war among Tartar and Chinese peoples, a part of them moved to the Che-Kiang province, neighboring that in which our city is located, and became established in Kang Tchou, a city I intend to visit, and the other part is in Arnoy in the Fo-Kien province. There are emigrants also in Peking and throughout China"**. After this, the laborious Chacham referring to what a German Jewish magazine said, talks about a group of Chinese Jews that: **"Only one had a**

real Jewish type, but except for the religion and circumcision, they are completely converted into Chinese by their language, dressing, customs, and habits, they also have Chinese names. . . It is said that Jews came to China from the north-western part of India by about the third century after Christ; they first remained secretly in Ning-hia, Hantcheou and Peking, and later became established in Kai-fung-foo". (1) A dangerous fifth column of secret Jews had entered China, who as a result of their total adaptation through the centuries, to the racial and social characteristics of the Chinese people are now dangerously confounded and diluted in the population of that country. It should be noted that although the Israelites of the former celestial Empire are considered among the most mixed with the indigenous race, since the last century they have kept the rigid custom of marrying only among themselves, and the above mentioned Hebrew leader says that they have kept their faith "**with the characteristic tenacity that distinguishes the Hebrew race**".

The historian of the Chinese Jews, Alexandre Wyllie, in his valuable book called **Investigations on the Existence of Jews in China, since the Most Ancient Times to These Days**, notes that the existence of the Jews was hidden for the majority, but that, nevertheless, "**some accidental observations in Marco Polo's trips, show that Jews were sufficient enough to be able to exert political influence in China and Tartaria**" (2). It is natural that a clandestine

(1) Israel Joseph Benjamin II. Chacham of Israel. "Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1846 to 1855." Hanover Editions 1863. Pages 206-209.

(2) Alexandre Wyllie. "Recherches sur l'existence des juifs en la Chine depuis les temps les plus reculés, jusqu'à nos jours". French translation. Paris edition 1864.

Judaism as secret as the one functioning in China for the last eighteen hundred years, was not easy for Marco Polo to identify, but the clandestine Jews who themselves know the problem very well, can identify its existence better than anyone else, through Marco Polo's reports in his writings.

### **CHINESE CLANDESTINE JEWS; MANDARINS, MAGISTRATES AND MILITARY**

Rev. H. H. Milman (a protestant) in his **History of the Jews**, writes of the Chinese: **"They were cultivated, and some of them, according to existing inscriptions, have been highly honored by the imperial will and have obtained the rank of Mandarins. One of these inscriptions —dated in 1515— praises the Jews for their integrity and fidelity in agriculture, commerce, magistracy and in the army, and for the adequate observance of their own religious ceremonies"**. This clergyman states — after saying that the Chinese Jews revered Confucio's name and followed the Chinese custom of religiously revering their ancestors: **"In other aspects they are strictly Jews... They only marry among themselves... They neither do not attempt to do proselitism"** (3).

S. M. Perlmann, the Jewish historian, in his **History of the Jews in China**, London, 1913, also tells of the existence of Chinese Jews in the army and of Mandarins, one of whom, called Chao-Yng Cheng, commanded a section of the army and rebuilt the city of Kai-fung-foo. Hebrew historians agree in ascribing great military talents to the Chinese, Tartaric and Mongolian Jews, and this may ex-

(3) H. H. Milman. "The History of the Jews". 3rd. volume. London edition 1868. Pages 166 and 167.



### **CHINESE JEW**

Photo published in 1950 by the official Israelite work titled: "Jewish Encyclopedic Handbook" of the Israelite author Pablo Link published by "Israel Editorial" of Buenos Aires. 1950, Jewish year 5710. Page 205. Word: JEW. This picture is published in addition to others of Jews from other countries, under the title: "Some Jewish Types"



plain their infiltration into the Chinese communist army, where they gossip against Chairman Mao Tse-tung and plead for a reconciliation with the Soviet Union, apparently to achieve world communist unity, but in reality to turn Popular China into a satellite dominated by the Jews who lead the Soviet Union. Clandestine Jews infiltrated in the Chinese Communist Party and in the governing and social institutions of the country, work in the same direction.

In another passage of his aforementioned book, the Hebrew S. M. Perlmann says that some Chinese Jewish children asked him why the Europeans had so much interest in them, and Perlmann replied: **"Because all of us are from the Jewish nation and creed, all of us are descendants of Abraham"**, despite the fact that in his book he has confessed that: **"The appearance of the Jews I interviewed was completely Chinese"**, except a young fellow who was seventeen years old who **"really had something of the peculiar Jewish type."** **"In their external appearance it was not possible to distinguish them from other Chinese."**

The distinguished Israelite historian confesses something that is well known, but which coming from a famous Jewish historian has greater probatory value: that it is not possible in most cases to distinguish the Chinese clandestine Jews —because of their Chinese names and last names, their Chinese racial type and customs— from other Chinese. Although they appear to be a part of the Chinese people, in fact they belong to a foreign nation and people — to the Jewish nation. In other words, they represent an infiltration of the Israeli nation and Israeli imperialism into the heart of the Chinese nation.

It is very interesting to note another statement by this Jewish historian, in reference to those Chinese Jews who did not hide their Israelite identity: **"Before ending,**



### **CHINESE JEW**

Member of the ultra-secret sect Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou, spread throughout China. Picture published about the middle of the 20th century by the Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia, Jewish official work of utmost authority on Judaism. Published in Mexico, 1948. Third volume. Word China. Page 326, 2nd. column.

**I must add to be fair with this old and cultured Chinese nation, that Jews in China have never had to complain about intolerance; they were never under exceptional laws; they were never persecuted or despised because of their religion. They always enjoyed the same rights as the Chinese people." (4).**

This Jewish confession is of utmost importance. Israelites say that the slaughters, persecutions and expulsion of Jews from different countries of Christian Europe and the Islamic world, as an alternative to their conversion either to Christianity or to the Islam, forced the Jews both from the European nations and the Mohammedan world to falsely convert themselves to Islam or to Christianity to escape persecution, slaughters or expulsion and to remain in the country in which they were living. Nevertheless, if this were the only explanation from these pretended conversions and for the decision of the clandestine Israelites, to hide their Jewish identity, how can it be explained that in China —where the famous Jewish historian S. M. Perlmann confesses that the Israelites have never been persecuted, and readily denies any case of intolerance— the phenomenon of clandestine Judaism has existed for many centuries up until our days, and Israelites hide their identity to appear as part of the Chinese people? This and other similar cases are proof that while it is true that in many cases Jews have been compelled to sink into clandestinity to escape persecution, expulsion or death, in the majority of the cases it is evident that they have chosen this path as a political strategy to enable them to infiltrate the society of the country in which they live in order to monopolize the leading positions and to bring the host country under their control.

- (4) S. M. Perlmann. "The History of the Jews in China". London edition 1913. Pages 24 to 37.

On the other hand this reality has been acknowledged by authorized Israelite writers who have even admitted, in unusual gestures of sincerity, that the clandestine functioning of Judaism has been motivated by political strategy and pragmatic convenience. In this way the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia**, in a rare gesture of sincerity in these so secret affairs, declares as follows: **"Jewish leaders and writers such as Daniel Israel Bonafou, Miguel Cardoso, Jose Querido, Mardoqueo Mojiaj and others, defended Mar-ranism (Clandestine Judaism) AS A METHOD TO UNDER-MINE THE ENEMY'S FOUNDATIONS AND AS A MEANS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO MAKE THE FIGHT AGAINST IT MORE FLEXIBLE"**. And in another passage — referring to the same clandestine Jews — says that those from Spain considered that **"Queen Esther, who did not confess nei-ther her race nor her birth, seemed to be their own mod-el."** (5). In this regard it is necessary to remember that the Bible's Book of Esther — whose study is an obliga-tion to all Israelites, eulogises a Jewish girl who pretended to be Persian and hiding her Israelite birth, loyalty and religion, could become the Empress of Persia, and succeed in nominating one of her Jewish relatives as Prime Minister of the Persian Empire — bringing Persia under Jewish rule and destroying any Persians who opposed Israelite domination. The fact that the clandestine Jews — as the above authoritative Jewish document confesses — have mentioned Queen Esther as their model shows that the main reason for the hiding of Judaism has been to accom-plish the total infiltration in the country in whose territory the Jews live in order to accomplish what Queen Esther accomplished by the same means — the domination of

(5) Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Mexico, 1948. 4th volume.  
Word: Spain.

the nations in which sects of Marranism or Clandestine Judaism function. In China, as in other countries of the world, clandestine Jews — as the mentioned authorized sources confess — obtained high positions as Mandarins, Magistrates and Chiefs of the CHINESE army.

The Jewish leader Israel Joseph Benjamin II, writing at the end of the last century, describes the situation of the Tartaric Jews living in Siberia, stating that he was informed that **"they settled in the Great Tartaria, where they live in freedom and in the best agreement with the natives. The leaders were equally chosen among the Jews and the Tartars and both of them shared the perils of war, but the Jews did not marry the Tartars and strictly adhered their own religious cult. It is worth while to observe that they think they are descendants of the tribe of Reuben."** (6). In spite of such descent, the Tartaric Jews have a Tartaric type that enables them to live unidentified among the population, as in the case of the Chinese, Hindi and Negro Jews, etc. But at least since the last century, they practiced racial discrimination against their cordial and kind hosts, refusing to marry them, believing in their own descent from Reuben's tribe. On the other hand, it is worthwhile to notice that the cordial reception given to them by the Tartars, and the freedom which the Tartars gave them, was repaid by the Soviet Jews with great slaughters of the unfortunate Tartars and the subjugation of the rest of them to communist slavery. This is another proof of Hebrew ingratitude to those who offer them friendship!

S. M. Perlmann, the Jewish historian, mentions that one of the Tartaric tribes adopted Jewish kings from a group of immigrants coming from Media and Persia, descendants of the tribes of Simeon, Ephraim and Mana-

(6) Israel Joseph Benjamin II. Cited work. Cited edition. Page 218.



sehh. He also states that these immigrant Israelites turned themselves in ferocious nomads and great warriors in Tartaria (7). These Tartaric Jews are at present the bulldogs of the Soviet Jewish regime in Siberia, and it is well known that there are many Jewish-Tartaric officers in the Red Army, for the Chinese and Tartaric Jews differ from those of other nations in possessing great military talents.

These millenary Chinese Jews, who have a Chinese racial aspect, practice Chinese customs, and use Chinese names, have been known to World Judaism, up to the present day, as Chinese Jews Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou. The Israelite leader, Rabbi Jacob S. Raisin, talking about the origin of the word Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou, says as follows: **"Some medieval commentators state that when Isahia (The Bible's prophet) forecasted the restoration of 'the land of Sinim' by the Jews, he had in mind those who travelled ten thousand miles from the Jordan through the Caucasus, Turkestan and the Tibet up to the Yellow river in China. Undoubtedly there are indications that centuries before the Christian Age the Jews had trade relations with the 'silk men' (this is the Chinese) who called them Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou, that means those who remove the tendon (referring to the Jewish ceremony mentioned in the Genesis 32-33). Probably Judaism was diffused there by the Radanitas Jews, who went by sea or in caravans, through the Samarkanda route to Khotan to exchange products from Africa and Europe for paper, glass, fine cloths and silk that were produced only in China at that time. They constantly increased in number in China producing wise and cultured people."** (8).

(7) S. M. Perlmann. "The History of the Jews in China". Cited edition. Pages 29 and 30.

(8) Rabbi Jacob S. Raisin. "Gentile Reactions to Jewish Ideals". New York edition, 1953, page 417.

In general, all Jewish historians who talk about the millenarian Chinese Israelites agree in saying that the origin of the name given to them (Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou) comes from their practice of the above mentioned rite in the Bible for ritual killing, and this was the name given in China to the members of a fraction that (as we will see later), practiced Judaism in an open way. The **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** says that this reference to ritual killing **"reveals the pre-rabbinic date of their entrance to the country"** (9) or in other words, that the Chinese Jews first arrived in China more than eighteen hundred years ago.

Readers may consult Murray's translation of the travels of Marco Polo with regard to the political and commercial influence of the Chinese Jews in 1286. (10).

On the other hand, the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** says as follows, regarding public Jews: **"Even often confounded with Moslems, they are mentioned in the Chinese Annals for the first time in the 'Yuen Shi' of 1329, because of a law on taxes to heterodoxes, and once more in 1354, when as a result of several revolts, rich Mohammedans and Hebrews were summoned to Peking to serve in the army. In both occasions Jews are called (in the Yuen Shi) Dju-Hudu, maybe a deformation of Yehudim."** (11).

In addition to the communities of clandestine Jews spread throughout China, already referred to, there is another Israelite community in the city of Kai-Fung-Foo, former capital of Honan Province, which has been operating in a more or less public way for several centuries,

(9) Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. Third volume. Word: China. Page 325, 2nd. column.

(10) Marco Polo's trips. Translated and edited by Murray. Page 99.

(11) Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. 3rd. volume. Word: China. Page 325, 2nd. column.

early references to this group being made by Jesuit Missionaries, particularly Father Matteo Ricci, in reports sent to Europe in the XVII Century.

Jewish encyclopedias and other books produced by the Jews for the Gentiles, provide, as I said before, much information on Judaism in respect of those things, which the Jewish imperialists allow the Gentiles to know, but hide, minimize and even misguide the Gentile reader on those affairs which Judaism considers to be **POLITICAL SECRETS** which **MUST BE HIDDEN** from the Gentile readers. This is why it is not strange that such encyclopedias and books when speaking of the very ancient Chinese Judaism, usually only talk about the communities that have operated publicly mainly those of Kai-Fung-Foo city. About this community they give much information which is highly interesting; saying that it flourished in other times but is today in painful decadence. The **Jewish Encyclopedia**, in addition to mentioning the Kai-Fung-Foo community also says that Catholic missionaries of the Seventeenth Century found other public Israelite communities in Hangchao-Foo and **OTHER CHINESE TOWNS** without expressly saying how many of them they found (12). The **Encyclopedia** adds that the attention of the Israelite historians has been concentrated mainly in the community of Kai-Fung-Foo, and not on others because of the archeological relics found in an old Synagogue, comprising marble tablets engraved in the Chinese language which help clarify several unknown aspects of the history of Chinese Judaism. These marble tablets are dated 1489, 1512 and 1663 respectively. That of 1489, referring to the Jewish immigration, states: **"Seventy families came from the West offering the**

(12) Jewish Encyclopedia. Published in New York and London, 1903 Edition IV volume. Word: China. Page 34, 1st. column.

Emperor tributes of cotton clothes; he allowed them to settle down in Peen-Lang, this is, Kai-Fung-Foo. In 1163, the Synagogue was built by a certain Yen-too-la, and in 1279 it was reconstructed to a great scale. In 1390, Tai-tsou, founder of the Ming dynasty, gave these Jews lands and additional privileges. In 1421 the Emperor allowed a Jewish physician, highly honored by him, to repair the Synagogue"... The Jewish Encyclopedia gives further information regarding the engravings found in these archeological monuments, which cannot be detailed here due to the brevity of this work. Among them, however, there is an engraving mentioning the Chinese Jews that reads: **"They are outstanding in agriculture, commerce, in public positions (magistracy) and in the art of war" (army).** In fact, it can be seen that Chinese Jews have stood out in trade, as the Jews have in other countries, and had achieved leading positions in the government, as the Jews have in the Gentile nations. But it seems to be a special characteristic of Chinese Judaism, as many Israelite historians have said — and also these archeological monuments confirm — that Chinese Jews Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou were experts in agriculture. This has allowed them to infiltrate among the peasants, just as their great military talents have also allowed their infiltration in the army, creating a fifth column of Israelite Imperialism infiltrated at all levels in China. This must undoubtedly constitute a serious danger for the Popular Maoist China if it is not found and extirpated, because both the public or hidden Chinese Jews, like all Israelites around the world, are in reality members of a foreign nation and agents of a milenary super-imperialism. As such, their complicity with their Jewish brethren of the Kremlin in their struggle to turn Popular China into a satellite of the Soviet Union, just



### **CHINESE JEWS TIAO-KIU-KIAOU**

From Kai-Fung-Foo in Honan Province in China. Picture published at the beginning of this century, taken from the monumental official Jewish work titled: "Jewish Encyclopedia". Published in New York and London, 1903 edition. Fourth volume, Word: China, Page 36.

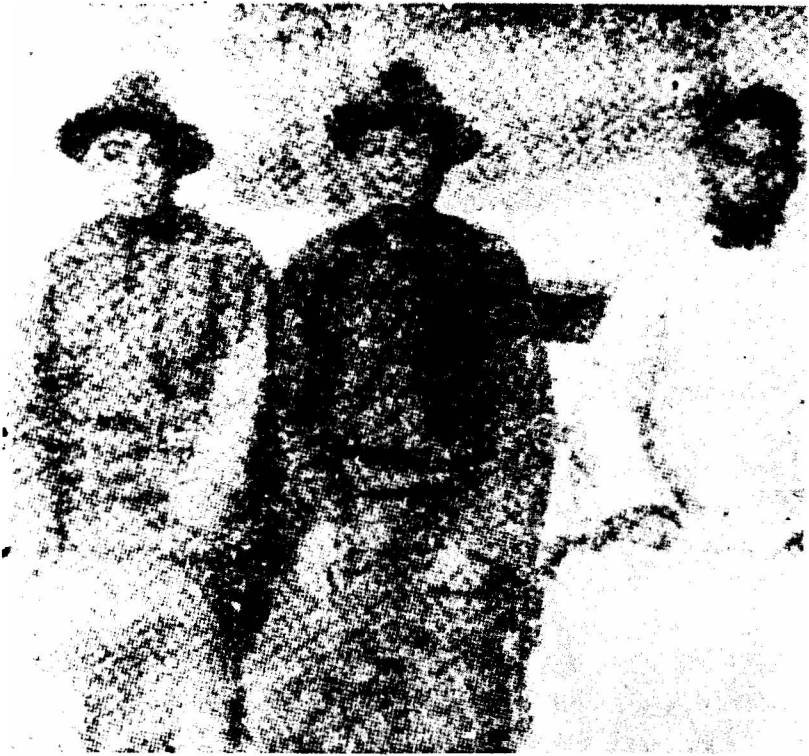


like the satellite socialist states of Eastern Europe, excepting Albania and Roumania.

Going back to the engravings of the Kai-Fung-Foo Synagogue, another inscription mentions the revolt that overthrew the Ming dynasty that protected Jews. This engraving was built by a Jewish Chinese Mandarin who was later Minister of State of the Emperor, and who had written about Adam's virtues (who was, according to the Bible, the first man created by God) and also about the virtues of Noah, Abraham the Patriarch, of all Israelites and Moses, the founder of the Jewish religion. The engraving made by this Mandarin refers to the fall of the city of Kai-Fung-Foo during that revolt and the destruction of the Israelite Synagogue and slaughter of a number of Jews by the rebels in 1642. The engravings say that Jews had been protected by the Ming Emperors, and had obtained positions in the Government. They also say that in the middle of this disaster a Jewish Chinese Mandarin appeared leading an army, and that this Jewish Mandarin rescued the Sacred Writings (the Bible) that had been thrown into the water by the rebels, reconstructed the city of Kai-Fung-Foo, and that this Mandarin and his brother rebuilt the Israelite Synagogue in 1663. This Jewish Chinese Mandarin had — as both public or clandestine Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Israelites do — a typical Chinese name. His name was Chao-Yng-Cheng (13).

These engravings, which constitute a historical monument of incontrovertible documentary value, show the great political and military influence that Jews had in China in the XVII Century. Not only did they hold senior positions in the Imperial Government, but they had also Chinese armies under their command.

(13) Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition 4th volume. Word: China. Page 34, 2nd. column.



### **CHINESE JEWS**

Photo published in 1950 by the "Jewish Encyclopedic Handbook" of Link. Published by Israel Editorial of Buenos Aires, Argentina. 1950, Jewish Year 5710. Page 97, 2nd. column. Word: China.

The **Jewish Encyclopedia** says that the Jew Chao-Yng-Cheng was Mandarin of the Chen-Si province (14), that is to say he was the Governor of that Province — clear evidence of Jewish infiltration into the highest positions of the Chinese Government.

The **Jewish Encyclopedia**, referring the Chinese Jews of Kai-Fung-Foo, also says that many of them: **"emigrated — during the war between the Chinese and Tartars — to Kiang-su, Arnoy and Peking; but they do not have synagogues in those places, and that some Jews with English protection, went to Shanghai and HongKong, where they practiced the traffic of opium and cotton."** (15). This information provided by the **Jewish Encyclopedia**, a Jewish document of unquestionable value, makes us see that the opium traffic, which led to the criminal war fought by the British Government against China, not only benefitted British and Indian Jews, but also the Chinese Jews Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou, who also participated in the opium traffic in Shanghai and Hong Kong under the protection of the British government, which as we all know was already a satellite under the control of Jewish Super-Imperialism. Under Jewish control, the British government even sent —betraying the ideals of democracy— its own people to fight and die to protect and expand the Jewish opium trade, so that the Jews might make a profit out of poisoning the Chinese people, and Chinese Jews participated in this trade at the expense of their Chinese hosts.

As Indian Jews and other Israelite communities of the Afro-Asian world were somewhat behind Western Judaism regarding the progress of their religious institu-

(14) Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. 3rd. volume. Word: Chao-Yng-Cheng. Page 665, 2nd. column.

(15) Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. Fourth volume. Word: China: Page 36, 1st column.

tions and internal policies, Western Judaism, during the XIX Century, started a program to adapt the Secret Jewish societies in Africa, East and Southern Asia to the advances of European and American Judaism, not only regarding changes in Jewish religious and social institutions but also with regard to new techniques of infiltration and political control over the Gentile nations, including revolutionary techniques intended to accelerate their domination. The revolutionary potential of the Afro-Asian Israelite communities began to develop progressively during the XIX Century, as Western Judaism sent experienced leaders to train them in all aspects in which they were backward in regard to Western Judaism. Regarding the Chinese Judaism and the Kai-Fung-Foo community, the **Jewish Encyclopedia** reports that the Western Jews formed a special organization called the "**Society for Rescuing the Chinese Jews**" whose task was the revival of the Israelite religion among those Chinese Jews (16) that as we have previously studied is the main generator of the Israelite Imperialism in China.

The **Jewish Encyclopedia** adds that the Jews of Shanghai cooperated with this society.

According to Jewish encyclopedias, the formerly flourishing Israelite community of Kai-Fung-Foo, fell into a painful decadence, diminishing the number of its members to the point that they had to sell their Temple. We, as experienced researchers of the history of clandestine Judaism, find and can prove that every time Israelite historians talk about decadence or disappearance of a Jewish community in books which the Gentiles can read (such as encyclopedias and other writings) in most cases — for there are a few exceptions as is natural — what really

(16) Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. IV Volume. Word: China. Page 36, 1st. column.

happens when there is a mass desertion from public Judaism, the majority of “**deserters**” are just pretending to abandon Judaism in favor of a Gentile religion, while secretly remaining loyal to the Israelite nation and religion. In other words, they merely transfer from Public Judaism to Clandestine Judaism.

Besides the millenary Chinese Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Jews — both the clandestine ones spread throughout China and those of Kai-Fung-Foo who openly practiced Judaism and who also emigrated, as the already mentioned Jewish book says, to different regions of China — this great nation received other Israelite immigrations which we will mention only briefly because of the limitation of space.

Chavennes, the Orientalist, talks about another Jewish colony established in China between 960 and 1126, composed by Jews that came from India. The Israelite historian, Elkan Nathan Adler, also mentions another Jewish penetration into China, coming from Bokhara through Persia in the XVI Century (17). The first immigrants, according to the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** “**settled down in several Chinese regions.**”

Since 1840 China has experienced further migrations of Jews from different countries, mainly European. According to the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** the opening of the so-called “Ports of the Treaty” in 1840, brought a number of English Jews to China from Hong Kong and India. In 1850, Elias David Sassoon, a rich Jewish trader settled in Bombay, India, established a branch of his firm in Shanghai. Born in Baghdad, his father had been Treasurer and banker to the Turkish Governor in that city. Referring to Elias David Sassoon, the **Castilian Jewish Ency-**

- (17) Chavennes and Elkan N. Adler, quoted by the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia**, cited edition, 3rd. volume. Word: China. Page 325, 2nd. column.



**clopedia** says that "he specialized in the trade of opium, among other things" and that when he established his branch in Shanghai, he was followed by the Kadoorie, great Jewish capitalists in Baghdad, and their big enterprises — the Sassoons and Kadoorie's — built a synagogue in Shanghai, founding a new Israelite community which until 1905, was mainly Sephardic. So this new Jewish community had the honor of being founded by the enterprise of a great international Jewish opium dealer, whose son, as millionaire as him, used the Moslem name of Abdula when in Baghdad, and used the Christian name of Albert while in London. His Jewish name, the good one always, was David. About this great international capitalist, the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** says: "**Sassoon Albert (Abdula, David) industrialist, banker and philanthropist. Born in Baghdad in 1817, died in Brighton, England, in 1897. Eldest son of David Sassoon and head of commercial and industrial enterprises of the family. He founded one of the biggest textile factories in Bombay, India, donated a great modern dam to the city and established several schools. Member of the Legislative Council from 1867 to 1871 and one of the most outstanding people in the society of Bombay. He frequented the Kings of England and his audience with the Persian Shah in 1889 was one of the events of the English capital. He was ennobled in 1872.**" The Jews frequently received titles of nobility in England, especially since the long reign of Queen Victory, to such an extent that investigators have shown that most of the titles of Earl, Marquis, Viscount and Lord are presently in the hands of Jewish ennobled families or of ancient aristocratic English families linked with Jewish families. Dukedoms have been Judaized by means of marriages of Jewesses and ancient Dukes, and those

Jewesses, with the help of the powerful Israelite communities, have secretly initiated in Judaism the eldest son of that marriage, this is to say, the new Duke. It is not strange, then, that the international Judaism is not in a hurry to overthrow the English monarchy, which is controlled by the Israelite imperialism.

The Russian-Japanese war and the persecutions it originated against the Jews, the failed communist revolt in Russia in 1905, that the Imperial Russian government justly imputed to the Israelites, brought as a consequence the arrival in China of fugitive Russian Jews. In 1917 Russian Jews who arrived to Jarbin and Mukden in Manchuria were antagonized by White Russians who accused the Russian Jews in the country of being originators of the Red Terror in Russia. When the Japanese invasion of China in 1931, many Russian Jews living in China, who were fleeing from the Japanese (who accused them of being communists), were forced to move to Tientsin, Hankow and Shanghai, where they were reinforced by new immigrations of Polish and Roumanian Jews. In 1928 an Israelite community of Ashkenazim Jews joined with the Sephardic community, under the auspices of the lodge, recently formed in Shanghai, of the secret order of world Jewish Masonry called B'nai B'rith, which was in this way starting to extend its tentacles into China. It must be remembered that the self-government enjoyed by the Israelite communities throughout the world, and the ambitions of its leaders to command economic and political power, sometimes provoke deep rivalries between different Jewish communities; some of these remain the secret of the Jews, but others spread scandalously outside. One of the secret goals for which the Jewish Super-Masonry, the B'nai B'rith, was created, was to conciliate rivalries and dis-

agreements and promote harmony and reunification, as it infiltrates among the various Jewish communities possessing different rites. The B'nai B'rith achieved this objective of unification regarding the Jewish Ashkenazim and Sephardic communities of Shanghai.

A new Jewish immigration into China started in 1933; Israelites fled from Germany and Austria harassed by the Nazis. According to the **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** these new Jewish migrants of German origin obtained positions in the administration of the Republic of China. Among them the distinguished Israelite, Dr. Bernhard Weiss, who had been Vice President of the Police in Berlin, was entrusted with the reorganization of the Chinese police by Chiang Kai-shek's government. The **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** adds: **"Many German officers of Jewish origin enlisted in Chiang Kai-shek's army. Miriam Karnes, who died during the bombing to Nanking, founded a famous battalion of Chinese women. General Moshe Cohen helped organize the supplying of food, arms and equipment of the armed forces. Other (Jewish) refugees served in the nationalist rows as doctors and nurses. But the great amount of German Jews reached China only after the mournful year of 1938, that brought the Reich's great slaughters, the annexation of Austria and the Sudetes."** In 1940, the B'nai B'rith in China was led by an English Jew called Mendel Brown (18).

Jews have also used their women in China to ensnare great leaders, following the rules fixed in the Book of Esther in the Bible already mentioned, which tells how the Jewish Esther, hiding her Israelite origin and religion,

- (18) **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia**. Cited edition. Word: China. Pages 328, 329 and 330, and word: Sassoon David. 9th volume, page 460 2nd. column. Word: Sassoon Albert (Abdula, David) 9th volume, page 460, 2nd. column.

beguiled the Persian Emperor into falling in love and marrying her, thus becoming Empress of Persia. From this position, she engineered the appointment of her uncle as the Prime Minister. In China the Song family of Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Jews obtained great successes in this century by the same means. One of the Song sisters married Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the man who ousted the ancient Chinese monarchy and founded the Republic, becoming the first President. Another sister married Marshall Chiang Kai-shek, President of Nationalist China. Dr. Sun Yat-sen's widow became a member of the Maoist Popular China, where she presently lives and where, with the prestige of being the widow of the national hero, she can undoubtedly help the plans of international Judaism, in ensuring that a clandestine Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Jew, or at least a Gentile Chinese easily manageable by the Jews, will succeed Chairman Mao Tse-tung when he dies. If this goal can be achieved, the Jewish Racist Imperialists would seize power in Popular China and subjugate that nation to its yoke, reconciling China with the Soviet Union and putting it at the Soviet Union's vassalage — as projected by international Judaism. Up till now the Jews in the Kremlin have failed in their attempts to oust Chief Mao Tse-tung, but they still seek through an internal revolution to substitute his regime for one which would make China a satellite of the Soviet Union.

Despite past failures, the fifth column of clandestine Jews in China does not cease in their conspiracy to encourage the establishment of pro-Soviet gangs in and outside the Chinese communist party and army, deceiving many Gentile military and political leaders who do not know the imperialist background of this maneuver, by exploiting those who are ambitious for command and en-

couraging the individual resentments that exist in China as in any other country in the world. Besides, the insatiable Jewish imperialism of the Kremlin has conceived the idea that due to the wars in Indochina, a war may start between the United States and Popular China, which would give the Kremlin the possibility of sending armies to China to defend her, as it "defended" Poland from the Nazi oppression and also other East European nations, only to enslave them later.

In its effort to dominate China, the Jewish socialist imperialists of Moscow have even planned (in the event that other resources fail) a military invasion to the Chinese territory, similar to the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. But to achieve this without serious danger it needs to secure its western frontiers through arrangements with Federal Germany and the other European powers, thus eliminating any possibility of a war on two fronts. It could then withdraw many of the armies it has on the European frontiers, and concentrate all its military strength against Maoist China, to surround her with an iron belt with the help of the Indian government controlled by Judaism and others it wants to align. (Editor's quotation: Please refer pamphlet No. 9 of Political Secrets series, titled: "The Jewish Fifth Column in India". Readers may find information on how Hindi Crypto-Judaism controls that country).

It is urgent that German patriots and other western Europeans do not fall in this Soviet trap, covered under the bait of achievement of peace and security in Europe. If the Kremlin's Jews succeed in invading China and dominating it, they will turn against West Europe, which they have not otherwise dare to invade until they have been able to liquidate Mao Tse-tung's regime, among other reasons, and replace it for another controlled by the Kremlin and World Judaism. German patriots must be more



aware than anyone else, for the secret Jew-Communist Willy Brandt is determined to help his Jewish brethren of the Kremlin in these falsely pacific purposes, whose only real objective is that the Kremlin should be left free to invade (if they think it is necessary) Mainland China, for the above-mentioned purposes.

In the case of a successful invasion of China by the Soviet Union, the Soviet plan is to maintain occupation troops in China for an indefinite period of time, under the pretext of defending socialism as it has done in several countries of East Europe. The true and hidden reason is that Jewish Imperialism is convinced that the clandestine Chinese Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Jews are too scarce number (19),

- (19) All experts in Chinese Judaism agree that the Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou Jews in China are few, varying opinions from those who state they are more than two million, to Jewish writers that reduce its number to a minimum. This is not strange, for as we said before, it is an ancient and general custom of Jews to hide the real number of Jews in a country and of course of clandestine Jews. But even supposing they were more than two million, their proportion with the Chinese population of seven hundred million inhabitants would be barely three Jews for each thousand, which would be a very small percentage compared with that of the Jews in the Soviet Union.

In any case, the fact that Jews always hide to the Gentiles the real amount of Jews in a Gentile nation, especially the number of clandestine Jews, makes it impossible for us to assure that the clandestine Chinese Jews, Tiao-Kiu-Kiaou and other sects, total 2 million people at most. The number may be larger or smaller. Only an investigation using all adequate means to find out the truth, would allow the total localization of Jews and find out the real number of this fifth column in China of a foreign imperialism, conqueror of nations, that acts through super secret societies of clandestine Jews, who as members of the invaded country, are

in proportion with the big population of China, to be able to totally dominate China. They would therefore need the support of Soviet troops, as is the case in those East European countries whose Jewish population was so decimated by the Nazis that the Jews are too few to retain power without the aid of Soviet troops.

Judaism projects to control all kinds of governments — monarchist, democratic or communist — but it is an unacceptable tragedy for the Jewish nation (which uses communism to impose its totalitarian domination to mankind), that socialist or communist states should fall and survive in the hands of Gentile rulers, and it will not rest until it has overthrown all Gentile governments, even those that are socialist or communist — either existing now or that may appear in the future — to replace them with governments controlled by the insatiable imperialism of international Judaism.

The Soviet Union is the strongest bulwark of Judaism in the communist camp, due to the high proportion of Jews among the Russian, Ukrainian and other populations of the Soviet Union. Millions of Soviet Jews that control the Party, the Army, the secret police and other repressive organs, keeping the power by themselves, without need of foreign help. So complete is the power in the Soviet Union that it is possible for them to help support

- (19) Continued from page 25  
infiltrated in all political, military, cultural, religious and social institutions, until it takes over the governments by exploiting personal ambitions for power and personal resentments; by sowing false ideas to promote discordance, internal division and rebellion; and also by effecting espionage and sabotage to the benefit of foreign powers when this is convenient to the plans of international Judaism for world domination.

their Israelite brethren in the government of other communist countries where they cannot achieve this by themselves.

It is interesting to note that in all nations where the percentage of Israelites is small, in relation to the genuine population of these countries, there is a high rate of mixed marriages between public Jews and the real members of those nations. This question is highly important, because in such cases the Israelite imperialists try, by different means, to increase the number of Jews in those countries to facilitate their conquest and then to maintain control by their own forces.

Thus the Jews increase the Israelite population in a country by promoting mixed marriages between Jewesses and natives of the country they attempt to conquer. According to the Jewish laws, the principle is that mixed marriages of Jews and Gentiles are forbidden; but these laws prescribe certain exceptions, by which mixed marriages may be authorized by the Great Kahal or Regional Supreme Council, to obtain political positions, important espionage positions, or positions of economic or social influence. Such exceptions include the many instances in which Jewesses have married kings, nobles, presidents of republics and other high Gentile leaders, or married owners of great enterprises, newspapers and other institutions Judaism wants to control. In general the marriage of Israelite women to Gentile men are authorized because the millenary Jewish law "**Hagada**" indicates that Judaism can only be transmitted to children of a mixed marriage through the mother, that is to say, when the mother is a Jewess. But this orthodox "**Hagada**" law has been overruled by many Israelite communities, the reformists among others, who also accept as Jews the children of Jewish father and a Gentile mother. The fact that this has caused

a controversy between the innovators and the more Orthodox Jewish sects does not invalidate the fact that Jewish communities which accept the children of Jewish father and Gentile mother are still loyal Israelites, and consider the children as Israelites, introducing them, when they are 13 years old, in the secret organizations of totalitarian commands of the synagogal Fraternities, which exist among the Israelite communities of the different countries of the world for the mixed Jews of "stained" blood, and which are led and controlled by those recognized to be of pure blood (even though this recognition does not always correspond to a strict reality). In this way, the descendants of mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles are effectively organized and controlled by Israelite imperialism and are totally at its service.

It must be stressed that when the Kahal or Regional Jewish Council authorizes a mixed marriage of a Jew or Jewess to a Gentile, they make the individual swear under severe penalties that he or she will do everything possible to have the children introduced at the age of 13 or later, to the community of Israel, in a secret way so that the Gentile husband or wife will be unaware of the introduction. If the Jewish father or mother disregard this oath, in addition to the penalties applied to them, the local and regional Kahal seek the aid of other Jewish relatives, to ensure that the children of those mixed marriages may be prepared and introduced into Judaism and render the oath of obedience to the leaders and of secrecy, in an occult ceremony with impressive rites.

The nazis, dealing with the Jewish problem, mainly as a racial problem, committed a serious mistake when they considered as Germans the descendants of three German grand-parents and only one Jewish grand-father. It is evident that from a superficial racial point of view,

such children were predominantly German, but the Jewish problem is not only racial but something much more complex, as the reader may have attested; in fact, as the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition said, it was enough to have only one Jewish grand-mother, or even only a Jewish great-grand-mother, or even only one great-great-grand-mother, for the descendant could be admitted to the Jewish secret societies. And all this because of the reasons we have just mentioned. This is why the laws that ruled Inquisitorial Europe and later Spain and Portugal were justified; they considered as "new christians" and therefore as suspects of Judaism, anyone who two or more centuries back had only **one** Jewish antecessor, and excluded such people from positions in the government, in the army and the church, even when there were not enough evidence (which was difficult to obtain) that they practiced Judaism in secret. This legislation lasted until the Inquisitorial regime was suppressed.

In China, as in other countries, communities of Ashkenazim, Sephardic, Arab, Indian, Russian, German and Roumanian and other Jews have authorized, since their arrival in China, mixed marriages with Gentile Chinese; children with partially Chinese features came from these marriages, who after getting married with other Gentile persons of the country, had children with more Chinese than Jewish appearance. Later, mixed marriages have increased the number of fifth columnist Israelites, whose racial appearance is Chinese but who in secret are members of the nation of Israel, increasing in this way the clandestine Israelite fifth column. Although we believe that the Chinese population resulting from these mixed marriages may still be small, it would be an important investigation to calculate the number of clandestine Jews in China.





**CHINESE JEWS AT THE CEREMONY OF READING THE TORAH**

### **CHINESE JEWS AT THE CEREMONY OF READING THE TORAH**

Jewish secret societies, called Synagogal Fraternities, get together at least once a week, on Friday evenings, but in emergency on any other day, to solemnly read and comment a part of the Torah, the five first books of the Bible, and the Bible books of the Prophets, where according the Jewish belief, are the promises God made to Israelites to dominate nations where they settle and the world in general. Following this ceremonial reading and commentary, the members of the secret Fraternity inform the Assembly what they have done to dominate the political, military, economic, social, religious sectors, etc. whose control has been entrusted to the Fraternity by the Local Supreme Jewish Council. They also plan ways in which they can take over leading positions, and intrigue and manoeuvre to eliminate the Gentiles in such positions.

During the Inquisition and the period of Nazi persecution, members of the Jewish clandestine Fraternities infiltrated into those regimes, taking skillful steps to prevent their meetings and operations from being discovered, Judaism has centenary experience in this. This photo shows that Judaism is active in China for its task of conquest. Photo taken from the Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. 3rd. volume. Word: China, page 325, first column.

What I have said before about the clandestine Tiao-Kiau Jews is also valid for Manchuria; but regarding this vast Chinese region we will give some additional information regarding public Jews — the Jews who openly admit their identity.

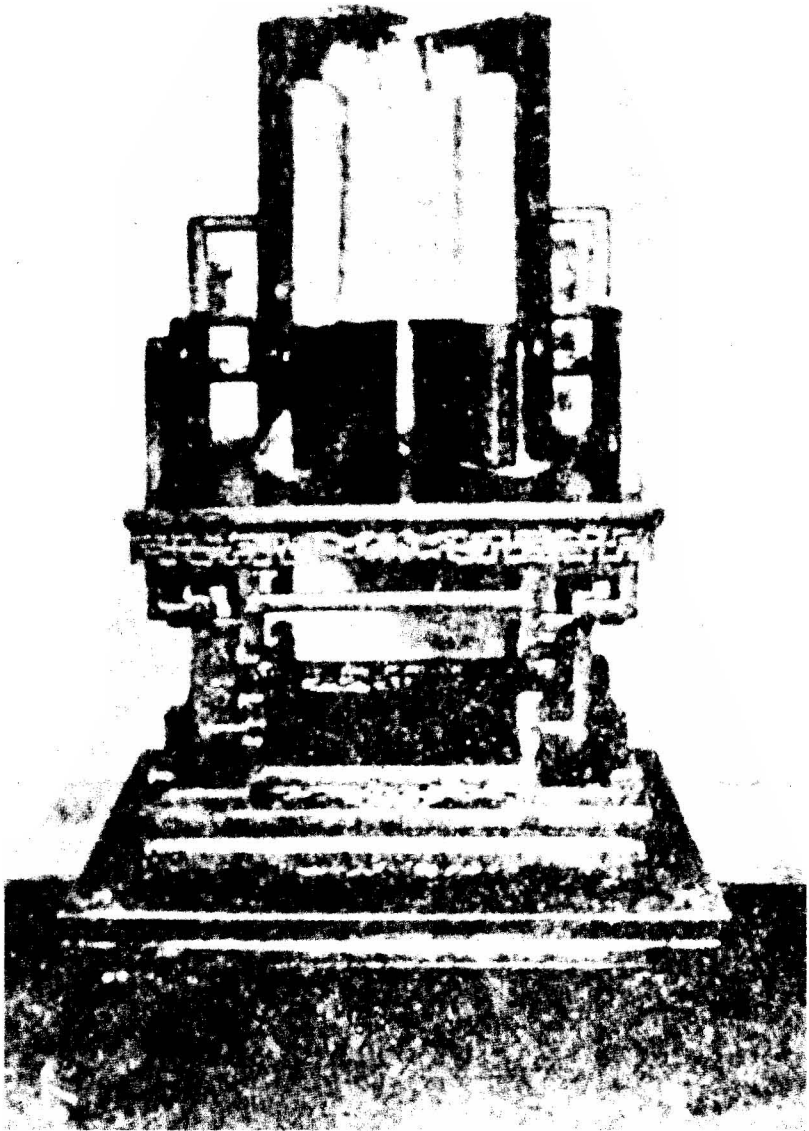
The **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** makes the following statement among others: **"The building of the Transiberian Railroad brought (to Manchuria) a certain amount of Jewish traders that founded a Jewish community in Jarbin"**. That after the Bolshevik revolution, many Jews from the Soviet Union emigrated to Manchuria, and were antagonized by the White Russians, who committed several murders. That these new Israelite emigrants **"were not delayed to incorporate themselves to the economy of the country as employees, merchants and industrialists"** . . . That the Japanese hostility to Jewish businesses when they occupied Manchuria in 1931, forced the Jews to emigrate to Southern China and other countries. The **Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia** also adds that in 1931 there were SEVERAL SYNAGOGUES in Jarbin, Mukden and Dairen as well as community philanthropic, cultural, pedagogical and Zionist institutions, etc.

The Japanese did not know the secrets of Judaism, and they tried to eradicate it using wrong methods, similar to those used during almost two thousand years by other nations in the world. In 1942 they closed all Synagogues (20) but they did not know that any time Gentile governments, through the centuries, have used this resource, it has only served to force Israelites to turn from public Jews, identified as such, to clandestine Jews that hide their adherence to the nation of Israel, apparently

(20) Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition. 7th volume, Word: Manchuria. Page 260 1st. column.

becoming assimilated among the people in whose land they live; thus being more dangerous. In this way, due to the Japanese mistake, public Judaism in Manchuria massively sunk into clandestinity, except those who emigrated with their enterprises to the south of China and other places.

The fact that in some countries in Europe, and specially in America, there are Jews leading the Maoist organizations, has made some people wrongly believe that Maoist communism is also controlled by the Jewish imperialism. However, what is really happening is that world Judaism — imitating Karl Marx's tactic of annulling Bakunin's international by infiltrating and controlling it with Israelite agents — tries to do the same with the international communist movement that Mao Tse-tung has been creating. These public or clandestine Jews who pretend to be enemies of the Soviet Union and its satellite communist parties, infiltrate and obtain leading positions in Maoist organizations of different countries; little by little they obtain control over many of those organizations or parties often following a genuine struggle against the puppet Moscow parties. But Judaism, as always, will win this game if it succeeds in taking over Maoist parties and organizations throughout the world, just as it won when it succeeded in infiltrating the international movement of the Gentile revolutionary, Michael Bakunin.



**CHINESE CHAIR WITH TORAH ROLL**



### **CHINESE CHAIR WITH TORAH ROLL**

Jews in China use very elaborate chairs to read the Torah in the respective sabbatical ceremony. However, clandestine Judaism, especially in times of danger, avoids using such furniture in their secret ceremonies and meetings, to prevent any Gentiles who might discover the meeting from realizing what is going on. Clandestine Jews have centuries of experience at hiding their secret meetings, and have everything ready to camouflage their meetings to make them appear to be innocent meetings if a Gentile intruder discovers them. In times of the Inquisition, clandestine Jews sometimes used catholic clergymen, who were secret Jews, to arrange for their secret weekly meetings to be held in the curacy of the church or in some other room of the catholic church, under the patronage of these clergymen. In this way if any Gentile discovered the meeting, the clergyman told him that the meeting was composed of faithful catholics of the Parish. In other cases they arranged for secret Jews who had infiltrated into the guilds of artisans to obtain the use of a room in the guild. If the meeting was discovered by somebody, the clandestine Jewish leader of the guild would declare that the meeting was being held to discuss some matter of interest to the guild. Similar secret meetings were arranged on the premises of other reputable Gentile organizations. Photo taken from the Castilian Jewish Encyclopedia. Cited edition, 3rd. Volume. Word: China. Page 325 first column.

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